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THE WIDER WAY

Wilson, Desemea Newman

THE WIDER WAY

A Novel

BY DIANA PATRICK

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CONTENTS

PAGE

BOOK I—THE STRAWS 1

BOOK II—THE BRIDGE 137

Like straws upon the stream of Life are we,
Some, steered by wind and current, sailing free,
Others, by eddies caught, swing round and round,
Drift to the shallow marge and run aground;
Some, caught by stick and stone, are turned aside,
And down the narrow rapids try to ride;
Some thread the pass and gain the wider way,
Others are tossed on drift-heap—there to stay.

Upon the Bridge the Gods stand in a row
To watch the straws come through the arch below.

F.C.G.

(In the *Saturday Westminster Gazette*)

BOOK I
THE STRAWS

THE WIDER WAY

BOOK I

THE STRAWS

CHAPTER I

BEFORE she was thirteen, Veronica Quening was already something of a celebrity in Beighlington.

The splendour of her hair, russet gold as Autumn beech leaves above the sea-green translucence of her eyes, made of her, passage through its dingy streets a glory and a grace.

Dreary beshawled women, going slip-clump, slip-clump upon their wooden clogs to and from its hundred factories, would delight her with their hoarse loud whispers, —"E-e-h, sitha, see yon lass's hair! She's getten some, 'esn't shoo?"

Less acceptable, yet tributes still, were the gibes of a rival gang of children, bound for the Roman Catholic School, between whom and her own Burrow Street Board School comrades was a bitter, unending feud.

"Bunnies!" would yell the St. Anneites in ear-splitting accents.

"Nannies!" their adversaries would shrilly retort. For Veronica there were special and distinctive jeers.

"Ginger-mop!" "Look out, there's a fire!" the boys would shriek in pretended terror, or that deeper insult that time cannot wither nor custom stale,—"Carrots!"

Small girls would toss unkempt heads, and, suddenly assuming a mincing gait, would patter towards her on their broken boots, affecting to fling a heavy burden of luxuriant tresses across an over-weighted shoulder.

Veronica bore these attentions well. Some, she might have avoided by taking a short cut to school along deplorable streets of back-to-back houses. But, in that case, she would have missed the shops.

First, at the junction of Caven and Silver Streets, sweeping regally into both, and partially overlooking a mysterious plot of land, where, it was whispered, a Carnegie Library was soon to rear its free, proud head, was Dernier's, the big draper's. The name humorously emblazoned on its façade was "Le Dernier Cri." For some time subsequent to its opening this had been a term both of irritation and mystification to the worthy townspeople, who thought London talk bad enough to understand, but what on earth was this outlandish stuff? Finally, however, they compromised on "Dernier's," and as such the emporium was now widely known and appreciated. Here, every Friday, as Veronica reluctantly passed, beauteous, satin-swathed maidens were decking the windows with Manchester's latest inspirations. They would pause in hanging the immense feather boas or the cape-like lace collars,—own cousins to the Nottingham curtains in the next window—to nod elaborate heads and throw simpering smiles to the young clerks passing hurriedly to their nine o'clock rendezvous.

Then came the jeweller's, the friendly, handsome proprietor usually at that quiet hour standing on the step discussing the day's racing prospects with a little red-faced man who came across in his tidy apron from the grocer's on the other side. Veronica, nose snow-drop-white where she pressed it against the pane to gaze at the fairy gems softly sleeping in their white velvet beds, could hear odd scraps of their talk. "—Double on Falling Star and Whitewash, and have a saver on Gallant Gertie!"

A step or two farther and she was at the confectioner's, with its rows of shining buns and plebeian Sally Lunns elbowing aristocratic Maids-of-Honour, and its central wedding-cake, destined apparently for some shadowy, eternally-waiting bride, for there it had been, discreetly veiled in gauze, ever since Veronica could remember; then the book-shop, darkly-huddled between the drug store with its alluring scents, and the china warehouse with its incredibly fragile early morning and afternoon tea-sets; the pork-butcher's, the smiling, broad-faced German owner stacking the brilliant polonies, the flabby pies, the odd corners of pig on the marble slab. "Dere's a a'porth ofer der 'af-poundt," was his stock phrase. Those "a'porths ofer" were the bricks that at that moment were mounting into a fine house on the Stepton Road. Next it, and like it, passed leisurely in winter, hurriedly, nose averted, in summer, was the fishmonger's. Veronica thought it beautiful with its scarlet lobsters or pink salmon lying on the pale-green ice. And the dark girl in the cash desk had long coral earrings; they swung against her creamy neck as she bent above her ledger. Next came her father's fruit and vegetable shop,—"far too many cabbages and far too few daffodils," Veronica would remark critically to Biggs, the foreman, setting boxes of mustard and cress on the shelf outside;—and, at the next corner, beyond the banks and the livery stables, shaved dizzily several times daily by spirited horse-drawn trams, the millinery establishment, nestling so shyly under the protecting upper stories of the huge Caven Hotel that it might have added a T to the MODES neatly painted over the window and been more strictly within the limits of truth. But, though Veronica thought the hats frankly hideous, she admired the downy curled feathers, the sleek ribbons sheening over the white paper rolls, and the gilded basket crammed to overflowing with exotic (Soho) blossoms, above which tropic birds and even detached wings hovered expectantly.

Impossible to miss these delights! Easier far to bear the quips of envy! She would hold that graceful head a little higher, and turn an exquisitely clean face to the grimy one confronting her.

"Which is *your* hair, and which is your shawl? I can't tell the difference," she would say in sweet derision.

Sometimes, in the battle-joy of repartee, she would even momentarily forget the appalling frock in which that year she was doomed to live and move and have her corporeal being. It was a distressing garment in Scotch plaid, made, as her stepmother said, a decent length to cover her knees. This it did generously,—or ungenerously, if one so looked on the matter. The malignity of that dress was uncanny. Largely constructed,—in both senses,—in the charity shape over which Jane Eyre must have wept, it had yet seized avidly on a hideous monstrosity which had fallen moribund upon Beighlington the previous summer, after many a fainting pause en route,—the leg-of-mutton sleeve. Its padded horror had been beyond Mrs. Quening's resisting power. There was plenty of material,—the obliging salesman had shown a pallid anxiety almost to give it away, and her eager shears swept off an extra inch to the lavish limits of the pattern.

That frock coloured the twelve months of Veronica's thirteenth year, less vividly as repeated washings,—in which the sleeve stuffing was sadly sacrificed on the altar of the "mangle"—obliterated the early violence of its yellows and blues and greens. Henceforth she owed Scotland a deadly grudge. No longer were her eyes of adoration turned to Bonnie Prince Charlie and Flora Macdonald for ever fixed, patiently romantic, upon the schoolroom wall. No more, in intimate girlish converse, did she airily allude to her descent from some hardy Scottish chieftain. She boldly swept her ancestors to

"A castle precipice-encurl'd
In a gash of the wind-grieved Appenine."

Her unremembered mother became a modern Portia, a nineteenth century Juliet, the daughter of a proud Italian noble.

For in that longed-for April, when the tardy Yorkshire town awaited the lovely onrush of Spring, when, in the Quenings' nursery garden the almond blossom had already threaded its pink embroideries across a background of pale blue sky; when one began to believe that once more the laburnums and lilacs and cherries were preparing to hang their topazes and amethysts and pearls over the high stone wall enclosing it,—Veronica entered the seventh standard, with its inestimable privilege of browsing with the gentle innocuous Lambs among the Tales from Shakespeare,—and Italy's spell bound her. The Bard of Avon, undiluted, was, in the elementary schools of the neighborhood, "barred" in quite another sense, as Brian Courage, the young headmaster of the Burrow Street School, would remark with a whimsical laugh. Chapels by the score testified to the zeal with which Beighlington youth was kept unspotted from the world.

Meantime, the Chairman of the School Board, who, like Lord Melbourne, "saw no use in education when—he and his fellow-members—got on so well without it," would quote amid encouraging laughter the progressive tag,

"Learning's gas, but earning's brass!"

And in every foetid mill, the children of the lower classes were employed "half-time," their pale faces bent above flying fingers before the clattering looms, ears deafened (luckily), eyes, opened since daybreak,—in winter long before,—lack-lustre and dim as the mill-ponds without. Small wonder that when noon released these little slaves to spend the afternoon in the pursuit of learning the sight of their drowsy heads stooped above maps and figures and needlework, would rouse Brian Courage to

bitter wrath. "Half-timers!" Abhorrent word! That it should live in the same language as the sweet syllables of "Childhood!" Sometimes it seemed to him as if the childrens' sunken faces were the white paving-stones across which the mill-owners stepped to affluence. He would sigh and bid his teachers use compassion,—not whirl too fast these helpless wheels in the inexorable machine of Labour.

Veronica was not of these unfortunates. She, like the other members of her class, was a day-scholar. It was even said that her father was a warm man who could easily, had he so chosen, have sent his only child to the Grammar School. Veronica cared little. She loved Mr. Courage. She liked his tall, spare form, the quiet austerity of the clever young face, the unwonted fire that occasionally lit the sombre darkness of his eyes. She sighed with joy when he came into her classroom, and, courteously interrupting Miss Sheppington, from whom hard dry facts were rolling like peas from a slit in a brown paper bag, took the book in his long white hand and fluttered its pages as though shaking from it flowers of speech, magic and glowing. Then Veronica walked in enchanted lands. She thrilled to his tales of the French Revolution, whose blood ran thinner than water when inoffensive Miss Sheppington droned of it. To that gifted instructress the Indies were places whence useful commodities came; to Brian Courage, and to Veronica ever after, they were

"Summer isles of Eden lying in dark purple spheres of sea."

His eyes would meet the deep brilliance of hers across the knife-sliced desks. Often he forgot that these were occupied, and told his vivid stories to her alone. He thought her beautiful, with her small flushed face, and the dark line of slender eyebrow beneath the tawny shadow of her hair. Manlike, he never saw the ridiculous tartan frock.

On one such afternoon of rare delight, Mr. Courage spoke to her as he finished the lesson.

"Veronica Quening, come to my room at playtime!"

Eyes turned to stare at her as the master left the room; the anxious brown ones of her motherly little satellite, Jennie Dixon,—even the pale orbs of Miss Sheppington, "like nasturtium seeds and two straws for eyebrows," thought Veronica crossly.

"Not attending, I suppose," the teacher snapped.

"I was!" retorted Veronica loftily. "I always do if there is anything worth attention."

"You are a rude girl! Take your book and write 'I am impertinent' a hundred times."

Veronica shot a reassuring glance at the perturbed Jennie.

"I am impenitent," she wrote with sly malice, and at three o'clock, when there was recess for ten minutes, she laid the book before her teacher's outraged eyes and fled to the head master's room.

"Come in, Veronica," he said, as she knocked. "I want a little talk with you. Let me see, how old are you?"

"Thirteen in June, sir."

"Well, I think you could win a Grammar School scholarship. Would you like to try?"

"No, sir," she returned promptly, "I would rather stay with you."

"But, my dear child, I think you ought to go to a better school now. Come, you would like to learn French and purer English, I am sure. Have you thought what career you are likely to choose?"

"Oh, yes, Mr. Courage," was the confident reply. "I am going to be an actress."

He hid a smile.

"That is quite an interesting life, certainly. A good education will help you to success in it."

"Yes, I know. I should like to please you, but my

father wouldn't let me go, I am afraid. He says I am to go into the shop next year."

"And will you like that?"

"I should hate it, but I'm not going. That's when I shall run away to be an actress—Peg Woffington wasn't as old as I am when she began. But that's a secret," she added hastily.

"Of course, Veronica, you can quite trust me. Perhaps you will come and tell me when you have quite decided to take that step," he answered, gently. "Meantime, don't you think I could persuade your father to let you continue your studies for the next two or three years?"

"I don't know," she returned, doubtfully, "I'm afraid he might be rude to you."

"Well, we shall see. Anyhow, you may come to me every day for a little extra tuition. Miss Sheppington has such a large class I cannot expect her to give you much individual attention. Would you like that?"

"Oh!" she breathed, flushing delightfully. "I should love it!"

"That is settled then. Between ten and eleven, each morning, we will say. Tell Miss Sheppington of our arrangement."

She lingered.

"I don't like Miss Sheppington, sir. You've simply got to believe the things she tells you; they're too uninteresting to be anything else but true. But when you tell us—things—" she added, half-shyly, "—why, they sound so much like fairy tales that you feel sort of frightened in case they didn't really happen or don't really look like that. But I wouldn't mind leaving Miss Sheppington. I think teachers ought to be interesting."

He leaned back in his chair, and looked at her quizzically.

"Only a very small portion of the world is peopled by interesting folks, Veronica," he said. "Many are worthy,

many kind, many commonplace. It is only the few who have that other quality, magnetism, charm, fascination, call it what you will, you can't describe it."

"Those are the only ones you would care for, Mr. Courage!"

"Perhaps, Veronica,—I am not sure. I admire worth, I hope."

"Have I got it,—what you said,—magnetism?" she asked, suddenly.

"I am afraid you have, Veronica." Then, seeing her look of surprise—"it is not an unmixed blessing, you know."

"Never mind! I'm glad I've got it."

"Well, you must go now, dear, and don't be too troublesome to poor Miss Sheppington!"

Yet when she reached her place and found a lesson on Switzerland progressing, and when the teacher, making the final syllable rhyme with "gets," demanded dolefully, "What are Cha-*lets?*" the opportunity seemed too rare to be lost.

"Little onions for pickling," she volunteered, innocently.

Twenty years ago, the ugliness of Beighlington,—called Beethlington by its inhabitants,—was at least compact. A mile out from Caven Street in all directions but East, the surroundings were tolerable, three miles away, beautiful, for there, on North, South and West, the roads ran up like white arms to embrace the wide splendour of the moor.

Veronica lived on the Western side.

Leaving the stolid square little peg of a Jennie, on whom a round sailor hat perched incongruously, with a "So long! Be good!" she turned from Caven Street into a broad, pleasant road, which almost directly began to ascend.

On her left lay the Bevan public park; on her right

stood the solid Georgian mansion of Machin Smith, whose great foundries contributed generously to the smoke and smuts deplored by the tidy Yorkshire housewives. Once, spacious grounds had appertained to the house, but most of these were now let to George Quening, and a high hedge separated them from the narrow strip retained by the ironfounder, well-known as a tight-fisted man who preferred a substantial rent to a wealth of fruit and flowers that he himself could not possibly eat or wear. Veronica often met the ironfounder, a man of sour aspect, yet with the full lips of the secret voluptuary. She knew that he had built a dreadful row of squalid workmens' dwellings for each of the eleven children borne him by a meek wife. These, first the offspring, then the houses, had been named atrociously,—Jane, Ellen, John Thomas, Sarah Eliza, and so on. She wondered if the combined curses of progeny and tenants gave him his bitter, cruel look.

After passing Burling House, the road became narrower, more countrified, and soon, continuing by the great stone wall which skirted the entire property, she reached her home.

Turning under a fine archway, defaced by an irritating board announcing to intensely-alive passers-by that George Quening, Nurseryman and Florist, was prepared to supply funeral wreaths on the shortest notice, she entered a square, paved yard.

On one side was a substantial cottage with blithely-curtained windows and snowy door-sill; on the other, a coach-house, topped by a long room running over it and the arch. Formerly a billiard room, with fair panelling and an excellent cornice, it was now stored with lumber, —broken tools, nets for protecting strawberry beds, flower-pots, bags and boxes of seeds and bulbs, and florid catalogues bearing blossoms too awful to be true. The fireplace, a deep Georgian one with high marble mantelpiece, was filled with penny packets of seeds. Dusty,

untidy, neglected, yet Veronica loved the room, for through its high, pointed windows one could see the wonderful moor, livid under lashing storms, wine-red with Autumn ling, or stilly-white beneath the enduring winter snows.

Baking-day, evidently, thought Veronica, appreciatively sniffing the appetizing odour of warm oven-cake as she approached the house, and, pausing only to rinse her hands in the wash-kitchen, and to throw her hat and coat and bag of books into a handy cupboard, she ran into the comfortable house-place, to find Mrs. Quening buttering the last of the delicious golden splits.

The room was stiffly arranged with rather ugly furniture, but the effect was cheerful and homely. A bright fire glowed over the "redded" hearth. One window opened on the yard. Through the other could be seen an expanse of garden neatly intersected by gravelled paths. At the further end clustered several greenhouses, and through an opening in the wall to the right, a short flight of steps led downwards to a part of the grounds not seen from this point. The plots were almost bare, but at their edges were long lines of shining yellow crocuses, like fairy theatre queues, hardy early arrivals, holding empty places beside them for the tardier, purple-clad dowagers. Clusters of snowdrops were also seen, as though the members of the ballet had joined the waiting audience, and were giving preliminary earnest of their graceful dance.

"That you, Ronnie?" said Mrs. Quening, as the girl came in. She spoke with a soft Northumbrian accent, very pleasing and gentle.

"Get to your place, honey, here's your father. And be quiet, now, and don't aggravate him, for he has been worried by the men to-day. They had put them chrysanths he potted up, in the cool frame, and last night's touch of frost spoiled 'em."

"So I expect he's in anything but a cool frame him-

self," muttered the girl, flippantly, as she seated herself at the well-spread table.

George Quening entered the house. He had dressed for tea; that is, he had sluiced his soil-encrusted hands under the yard tap, donned a coat, and tucked one corner of his blue stuff apron into its tape band, as if, thereby, he rendered it invisible.

He was at that time, a man of forty-four, tall, with good features overcast by ill-temper, eyes of stormy blue, and a finely-cut mouth distorted by the sneering lines into which it had now irrevocably fallen. A secretly successful man (like many Yorkshiremen, he hid his bank balance as if it were a crime,) he combined with a strange, religious fervour, business methods that closely approached the unscrupulous. He was a Dissenter, an admired local preacher at several of the "tin chapels" scattered about the moor. He had a certain crude oratory, a biting, gibing turn of speech that roused the stolid country folk to something near enthusiasm. With the same rough eloquence, he would garnish the spasms of rage and fury into which he was so often inexplicably swept; yet, queerly, with all this unrestraint, there was about him a reserve—a furtiveness—that made him a man uneasy to comprehend.

A native of Beighlington, he had spent the early years of his manhood as gardener on an Oxfordshire estate. Returning to Yorkshire, more than a dozen years previously with his wife, a pretty Southerner, then approaching maternity, he had surprised his acquaintances by taking over the well-stocked and somewhat extensive Burling gardens. Clearly, his wife had money, was the conclusion drawn. She, however, enjoyed her new home but a short time. Within six months she was lying in the bleak cemetery on the Stepton Road, and the baby, Veronica, was left, the fairest and least-tended flower, to the doubtful affection of her father. When she was three, Mr. Quening provided for her a new and more conscien-

tious protector. He married the widow, no longer in her first youth—except for her heart which was that of a child,—of a flourishing greengrocer who had owned the shop in Caven Street now filled with Burling produce. Folks smiled, George Quening was a shrewd chap; but sharpness of that kind was accounted above rubies in Beighlington.

To the little Veronica came unguessed-of comforts; a strong, sustaining hand to hold as she toddled along the garden ways: a kind, if tightly-braced bosom on which to lean a top-heavy head, with a row of shining buttons for a fat finger to poke,—tinker, tailor, soldier, sailor; a stuffy refuge in the folds of a tweed skirt when the big man's voice boomed ominously,—"Get the brat off that flower-bed, can't you, somebody?" . . . Delicious biscuits that held elusive seeds which small teeth would cleverly catch and crack luxuriously, releasing the pungent taste of carraway; or slabs of dark toffee dwindling slowly as one sat on the doorstep and watched the clouds go racing, racing by.

Those long, long days that drew so imperceptibly into the long, long years of childhood! The fascination of watching the small creatures that flew and crept and crawled about the huge garden spaces. The big spiders festooning their frost-gemming curtains about the trellises—these were "amzigles," as, for equally no reason, the tiny ones that sometimes ran enchantingly over stiffened baby legs, were "spogies." Bright ladybirds, with their sudden, unexpected flight, robins, and frogs, and butterflies and bees,—all dear companions to a lonely child. Then the first easy lessons, the brown spelling-book such a plain, unpretentious door to guard those magic glades, down which flitted fairy princes and ugly sisters, cruel stepmothers,—a little doubt here,—and golden goose-girls, and ice-maidens and brownies and elves. The charm of nursery rhymes; the mystery of

Taffy who "came to my house and stole a marrow bone," —a mystery not then or for some years solved. The coming of harder lessons, impressed on small, bare arms instead of on eager, pink ears, that whereas baby girls may pick daisies and violets and snowdrops, they must never, never wrench off the strawberry bloom or apple blossom, though it was the prettiest of all; that dolls' meals may consist extravagantly and indigestibly of cocoa and sugar or occasional raisins, but never nutritiously of an onion stew composed of shredded crocus bulbs soaked in water from the tank; the first hint of a dismal place inside the sad, dark moor where monsters who stamped their ankle-strapped feet and said "I sha'n't!" must inevitably be immured; the astonishingly sudden knowledge that crimson blood could run from noses apparently solidly-white as chalk; the winter chilblain, and the breathless contemplation of the terrible cure recommended by the big, cruel man, now called Father,—the beating of the small red heel with a branch of holly; the blessed relief when this Spanish Inquisitional remedy was vetoed by a placid, poultice-bearing mother;—grey days of rain, yellow days of sun, black days of fog, silver days of snow,—all blurred by memory into interminable years. And through them ran the bright thread of her stepmother's affection, wound with the dark one of her father's unmistakable dislike. . . .

Alone, she had gone her unlonely way. Companioned she was by the wild creatures about her, and, nightly, as she slipped into her comfortable bed in the little room over the kitchen, by the comrades of her imagination. They came to her then, the composite forms that she had moulded. To them, she could give every grace of environment for which she herself silently longed. Herbert, the hero of that earliest romance, was a beautiful youth, all fire and passion. He had flaxen hair and deep blue eyes shadowed by abnormal lashes, preposterously curl-

ing. Herbert was an artist, his masterpieces hailed by the adulation of the world. To the tempest of applause he presented a scornful mien, unbending only to Mignonette (so, after long cogitation, the heroine was styled). Mignonette was the perfect result obtained by combining pictures of Lead, Kindly Light (soulful cast-up eyes), Cinderella (enormous masses of yellow hair), the Shakespearean Calendar Rosalind (shapely limbs), Leeds Pantomime Fairy Queen (richness of attire), and Blossom Budd, an incredibly moral child who lived in a powder blue book in the corner cupboard, and was an unflagging ministering child. The last-named gave to Mignonette her great beauty of character, meekness, obedience, sweet endurance under slights, and an exquisite, shining truthfulness that made her bulrush-brown eyes huge pools of sanctity. Ah! What revels they had together, she and those faithful friends! What adventures, what sights were theirs! One night the jewel shops of Paris claimed them, the next saw them magically in Connemara, or Burma, where Herbert had ruby-mines to superintend, or in St. Petersburg, where Mignonette was the admired of hundreds of sleigh-riding nobles at the ice carnival. None ever knew of those companions, their lofty speeches, their gallant deeds go unrecorded in the annals of time. But to Veronica, their presence was a deep and abiding joy, that, nightly for years, made her drop petticoats and stockings and stays in untidy heaps, and even scamp her bedside petitions in her eagerness to be with them, for it was the custom of the priceless twain to arrive wonder-laden the instant she closed her eyes, even, inopportunely, in the middle of

> "Let Thy child live through all her days,
> To give Thee faith and love and praise."

But to-day, Veronica felt she was growing up. An uneasy conviction seized her that one night the phantom

pair might disappear, never to return. If she won the Scholarship,—then wonderful things might happen to her. . . .

Sliding forward on the slippery edge of the American-cloth covered couch, and meditatively munching the hot cakes, Veronica pondered how best to approach the subject. Not that she really feared the sullen man sitting opposite in dour silence. There was something gallant in her nature, splendidly poised even in immaturity, that rose to meet the onslaught of his too-frequent fury, but she hated his loud, hectoring voice, his distorted countenance, and the sight of the obvious pain that at these encounters clouded the pleasant face of Mrs. Quening.

"Father!" she began, after a quick glance at his lowering brow.

"Well?"

"Mr. Courage says I am his best scholar now."

"T'others mun be fine fooils then. What about it?"

"He wants me to go to the Grammar School."

"He does, does he? Goin' to pay for you, 'appen?"

"No, he thinks I can win a scholarship,—I think so too," she added, confidently.

"Trust you for that! Well, you're not goin', see?" harshly. "You'll leave school just as soon as ever the lor'll let you, and you'll serve i' t' shop. You've a brasted sight too much side, my lass. P'raps pickin' taters out of a tub'll take it down a bit," he snarled at the sight of her proud, scornful face. "What's more, I can't afford it; I'm losing money in this business with the damn fooils I have about me,—there'd be books and clothes an' what not, cockering you up till you're too big for your boots."

The green eyes sparkled like gems.

"You can afford it! I don't believe you," she flashed. "You are always saving and pinching, and everyone says my mother—my own mother—must have had some money.

I am sure she would have wanted me to go to a nice school, and learn French and—"

"Well, of all the damned nerve! You don't believe me, don't you, you young spitfire? Believe it or not, your mother hadn't a penny. Not a penny, do your hear?" he stormed.

"Be quiet, George," broke in Mrs. Quening, trembling. "Don't say things you'll regret. Let the child have her fancies about her mother. You've always made such a mystery about her, never naming her, such a queer, secret man you are. Neither Veronica nor me knows anything about her,—who she was, or what she was——"

"Who was she? Then I'll tell you now. She was a servant,—that's who she was. Likely to have a fortune, wasn't she? And what she was,—I can tell you that, too," he raged, "she was a——"

"Stop, man!" interrupted his wife. "For shame! Your child's mother,—say nothing against her, I won't hear it. Shame! With your preachings and your chapel-goin'—use some of your prayers for yourself, you need them bad enough."

He stared at her. A look of horror and disgust wiped out the fury of his gaze.

"Ay, I need them," he muttered at last, "and yours too, Susan, my lass,—yours too,"—and went quickly out into the twilight of the garden.

Mrs. Quening dropped to her chair and fell to crying softly. Veronica, face set, threw her arms about her.

"Don't, mother," she begged. "Don't let him make you cry! I do hate him, he's a beast, but I wouldn't cry. . . . Mother, do you think he's mad?"

"Oh, Ronnie, he's a strange, hard man, all knobs and corners, as awkward to get around as an artichoke," she answered, simply, drying her eyes. "He seems crazy one minute,—then something stops him, and he has a look,—a queer look,—like as if he's got something on his

mind he can't get rid of. Never mind, honey, I'll help you. You shall go to your grand school, and be a lady if you want. I'll manage somehow, Ronnie."

As they kissed, they could see in the dim spaces of the garden, George Quening's powerful figure striding impatiently into the dusky distance.

CHAPTER II

ON a flaming July afternoon Veronica and her friend Jennie were in the Hidden Garden.

This was Veronica's name for the scented square of sweetness less picturesquely alluded to by her father as "t' lower bit." It lay, screened by the high wall, out of sight of most of the trimly-ordered enclosure in which the greenhouses stood, and was reached by descending a few irregular steps. More rarely entered and less meticulously tended than any other part, it had a wilder look which made for the girl its dearest charm. Peering into it over a tangled bramble hedge, the upper windows of Machin Smith's house could be seen. On its warm walls stretched espaliers of plum and cherry; a splendid group of apple trees clustered about its centre. Vague rockeries, among whose stones forget-me-nots clung, filled its corners. Everywhere richly-hued flowers bloomed,—delphiniums and cornflowers, roses and peonies, and jasmine shaking its heady scent to mingle with the potent perfume of mignonette.

In an armchair of mossy stone Jennie was placidly seated, dexterously poking a crochet hook through intricate meshes of white cotton. She was seldom idle.

Just where the biggest apple tree threw a cool splash of grey shadow across the hot brown soil to the biggest pear tree, Veronica had slung a precarious hammock ingeniously constructed of a piece of old tarpaulin. In this she was half-sitting, half-lying. During the intense heat she had exchanged the tartan frock for a rag-bag survival of brown holland, so short that it displayed on each black-stockinged knee a neat basket-work arrange-

ment of darning. She had coiled the long plaits of her beautiful hair round her small head, and her face, rising exquisite as a rose lifting its dewy grace out of a sheath of tissue paper, was sweetly pensive as Greuze's "Innocence." Conveniently near as she swung lightly to and fro, was a rhubarb leaf, its humility crowned with a heap of royal ruby raspberries, eloquent of the fact that this was Saturday afternoon, and Mr. Quening had departed for "t' shop," which might be trusted charitably to detain him until eleven p. m.

It was indeed an eventful Saturday in Beighlington, namely, the one preceding the great annual upheaval, "Parish Feast," a veritable earthquake casting the townspeople far afield. At that moment the station was deliriously filled, as it had been since early morn, by a whirling, trembling, frowsily-mephitic mass of ill-clad humans, jostling, jesting, already jaded, bound for breezy Blackpool, or, where families were at once both large and small, for Morecambe with its more modest attractions. Even Jennie was primly prescient of the bliss that on Monday would be hers, when she would be strolling "on t' front" at the latter delectable watering-place, with an air as though she had been nobly born instead of ignobly borne there in an over crowded "trip" train. She cast down her brown eyes and dallied alluringly with a blissful vision of elusive winkles and seductive shrimps. Its joys were strong enough to wean her from an insidious regret that thereby she would miss "walking" with "t'schools" in a draggled dusty crocodile to a field pregnant with Sally Lunns and over-milked tea, dispensed by a "little round fat oily man of God," and a host of pious "weyvers."

She felt suddenly compunctious as she glanced at Veronica.

"What shall you do on Monday, Ronnie?" she asked, diffidently. "It's a shame your father won't let you come along with us to Morecambe."

"Oh, I don't really mind, Jennie. I shouldn't care much about going where I'd see just the same faces I meet here," returned Veronica, contentedly. "Now if it were some place like Flores in the Azores——"

"Wherever's that?"

"I've no idea. But it sounds lovely, doesn't it?"

Jennie adroitly dodged a laden bumble bee drumming heavily past.

"Yes," she answered rather doubtfully. She surveyed her friend in silence for a moment. . . . "But I think Morecambe and 'Eysham sounds all right. . . . Chain three, double, chain three. . . . Did you make it up, that name,—Flores something?"

"No, of course not. It's poetry. . . . I love poetry, don't you, Jennie?"

"Ye-e-s," came the response, still more doubtfully. "I like Casserby Anchor."

"Casabianca!" witheringly ejaculated Veronica.

"Well, I think that piece about 'Emly in the 'ospital putting her 'ands outside the bed is nice."

Veronica's laugh flashed out.

"And don't you love 'Mary had a little lamb' and 'Three Blind Mice'?" she drawled, ironically. "Oh, Jennie, I mean real poetry,—the sort that makes you feel all squiggly," she added, explanatorily, giving her shoulders an expressive shake.

"What sort? Tell me some!" demanded Jennie stodgily.

"I scarcely know any, but I'm going to save up and buy some books of it as soon as I can. I read a line the other day in a newspaper, and I've just got to find out what the rest of it's about,—

"The glory that was Greece and the grandeur that was Rome."

Doesn't that make you shiver?"

"Shiver!" returned the prosaic Jennie. "My chemise

is sticking all down my back, I'm that hot! And do pull your dress down, Ronnie: if old 'Machine' Smith is looking out of his back bedroom winder he can see——"

"He isn't," interrupted Veronica. "He sent round this morning to borrow one of our handcarts to take his luggage to the station, and save hiring a cab. They've all gone to the Isle of Man."

"How lovely! I've made up my mind, Ronnie, when I'm working and addling good wages, I shall go for holidays turn about, Blackpool one year and Douglas the next."

"How horrible!" mimicked her friend. "If I did that, I'd soon want to die and go to Heaven for a real change!"

"Veronica;" protested Jennie, shocked. "You say some awful things! I'd be frightened God would strike me if I talked like that," she finished piously, folding her strip of unpleasantly-scrubby lace, and prodding it with her hook.

"Don't you think that He'd be *pleased* I would like Heaven better than Douglas?" retorted Veronica, unabashed.

But Jennie was off proselytizing.

"Why don't you come to Sunday School with me, Ronnie? Sometimes I think you aren't a proper Christian."

"The curate has spots."

"Spots! Whatever——?"

"On his face. Pimples!"

"O-o-h, Veronica!"

"Well, he has. I don't think it's decent for a clergyman to have spots. . . . Anyhow, I *do* know the fourth commandment,—the Beighlington fourth commandment."

"Eh?"

"Well, nobody keeps the Prayer Book one; look at your mother, how hard she works on Sunday. But every one keeps mine: 'Remember that thou keep holy the Front

Parlour. In other rooms shalt thou labour and do all that thou hast to do; but the Parlour is the Holy of Holies. In it thou shalt do no manner of work, thou and thy son and thy daughter, and thy lodger and thy maid-servant.' (These go together, because if you can't get the former you don't have the latter). 'For in other rooms thou hast pots and pans and towels and sheets, but in the Front Parlour thou hast the Family Album and the Antimacassars thy great-aunt made. Wherefore must thou worship the Front Parlour and hallow it.' "

But the discussion threatened to develop along lines confounding to the simple Jennie. Her brown eyes showed her discomfort at this careless tampering with sacred subjects. But she did not attempt to convert Veronica further.

"Come on, let's go down to Judson's and get an ice-cream sandwich," she suggested, diplomatically. "And lap up that rhubarb leaf" (the Beighlington equivalent for "wrap") "and bring it along, or else your father will know you've been taking the rasps."

The girls wandered away down the leafy Burling Lane, arm in arm, talking of their coming separation,—amputation, almost, it seemed to the faithful Jennie, for it was now definitely decided that Veronica was to take up her newly-won scholarship and go to the Grammar School in September. Veronica herself scarcely realised how this consummation had been achieved. Mr. Courage had passed a noisy half-hour with Mr. Quening in the potting shed, and had emerged quietly victorious. Biggs, indeed, had sworn that the "boss" shook hands with the schoolmaster on parting. But this seemed an incredible statement.

Followed a period of sour silence on her father's part, punctuated by gusty outbursts of acrimony.

"Crack 'er up, milady! Gie 'er some more damned notions! We mun all start to talk fine, Susan, my lass, else she wean't understand us," he would jerk out with

withering venom. "What's Eyetalian for manure, we mun leave off using these 'ere vulgar words."

Mrs. Quening would quietly placate him.

"In a few years she'll be so clever, she'll be keeping us all," she would say with her fine calm smile, and Veronica's sense of outrage and defiance would die down.

"Keepin' us all in wer places, more like," he husband would retort, relapsing into stark silence.

But on the whole, the weeks of vacation passed pleasantly enough for Veronica. She was to have a new outfit to begin the term. The tartan frock was destined for the more effaced if more intimate rôle of petticoat. Mrs. Quening brooded over bundles of patterns, finally wavering between the charm of puce velveteen, opulent though creasy, and prone to betray its cotton origin by wearing threadbare, and a cheerful piece of scarlet Halifax serge.

"Shrieks of the dyeing," murmured Veronica, wickedly, entering the kitchen one day to find her mother sitting entranced before these blatant horrors.

"You must decide betwixt these, Ronnie; I can't make up my mind," said Mrs. Quening.

Veronica shook her head.

"I am going to have a navy serge, mother," she announced, firmly.

Her mother's finger ceased caressing the rich, fruity bloom of the velveteen, and crooked itself like a note of interrogation.

"Why ever, Ronnie, don't you care for these? That red's ever so bright and pretty, I'm sure. Blue serge is so ordinary," she said, surprised.

"Mother, you are a dear. I don't deserve that you should bother so much about me,—but have you ever noticed my hair?"

"Your hair, dear? Of course, it's lovely,—you know I think it is."

"But the colour, mother! Those—shades,—pretty as

they are," hastily, "don't go a bit with this sort of hair. You know if we look in the garden, we never see marigolds with scarlet leaves or orange lilies with purple ones. The plants that have the gay leaves like the Virginia Creeper and the Crotons haven't got any flowers."

"No, but we see vilet and yellow crocuses growing together, and I'm sure they look nice," demurred Mrs. Quening, for a moment mildly combative. "However, please yourself, dear, but I do feel navy's a bit dingy. Won't you have a bit of gilt braid or buttons on it?"

"No,—giltless, mother dear,—that's a joke, do laugh! Quite, quite plain, and a blue straw hat," said Veronica, with smiling finality, and her mother with a sigh consented.

The six weeks of vacation slipped happily by.

In the mornings, Veronica delighted in helping her mother make jam; it was enchanting to stir the contents of the copper pan with a huge wooden spoon, and see the rich wine of the fruit gush out to encarnadine the virgin whiteness of the sugar. She liked the hot, sweet smell when the "preserve" as it is called in Yorkshire, was poured into the pots ready for tying down and marking in her pretty handwriting,—"Strawberry, July," on to "Victoria plum, September."

In the golden afternoons, she would meet Jennie, breathlessly pushing an archaic vehicle in which reposed those thumb-sucking, somnolent, wholly adorable infants, the Dixon twins. Together they would wander up Burling Lane until they reached a sheltered cranny of the moor, festal with bilberries, belted with bracken on which Autumn had already laid her hennaed fingers, honey-sweet with heather. Here, they would set the twins to roll on the springy turf, and would take out, Jennie her needlework, Veronica the cheap copy of Tennyson that had been her stepmother's birthday gift to her, and while Jennie in secret embroidered a "piano top" for a mother who yet lacked a piano, placing each exact

stitch in the blue sun-flowers provided, originally enough, with fronds of maiden hair fern springing from their stalks, Veronica lay during the long, idyllic hours, revelling in her newly-acquired treasure. Sometimes, the bending grasses swaying to the rhythm of the magic words, she would read aloud, "Locksley Hall" with its sonorous prophecies, or "The Lord of Burleigh," whose glory-crushed bride was Jennie's heroine. Or she would dream that she was the "Lily-Maid of Astolat" or passionate, haughty Cleopatra, sailing the slumbrous Nile with Antony.

Occasionally, their butterfly-haunted solitude was broken by a sportsman, gun on shoulder, dog at heel, who gave them greeting as he passed to the remoter stretches where the plump grouse were plentiful.

Once, they had a distressing experience, sordid in its half-understood brutality.

The twins had fallen asleep, dark heads on Veronica's skirt. She was reading softly, tender eyes filled with dreams, the glamorous story of the Sleeping Beauty:

> "And on her lover's arm she leant,
> And round her waist she felt it fold,
> And far across the hills they went,
> In that new world which is the old."

when she was interrupted by an exclamation from Jennie. Turning, she saw approaching them over the tussocky grass, two figures.

The man, of a swarthy, handsome type found surprisingly often in the Yorkshire dales, was roughly dressed in corduroys, and wore a dingy handkerchief knotted about his thick, strong neck. A dark moustache half-concealed a vividly-red, full-lipped mouth. In his hand, he held a covered basket, evidently containing a carrier pigeon.

The girl was about sixteen, with a pretty, flushed and

tear-stained face looking out of the folds of a dark shawl. She wore a mill-skirt and brass-clasped clogs.

As the couple drew nearer, the man's white teeth could be seen glistening behind the coarse lips. The girl's voice came to them, shrill, with a deadly fear in it.

"Whativer mun Ah do?" she was crying. "Th'art bound to stand by me, Bill, now tha's gotten me into this trouble."

"Ah'm noan bahn to 'ev nowt to do wi't," he answered with nonchalant unconcern. "Tha mun lig on't bed tha's made, lass." He laughed brutally, and the girls hands clenched on the fringes of her shawl.

"Aw, yer doan't mean it, yer doan't mean it, Bill!" came the anguished reply. "Ah wor nobbut sixteen, an' yer foarced me to it."

"Nay, tha comed willin' enif, lass. But Ah'm stalled o' thee an' t'missus an' all. Tha'd better tell 'er, it maks no odds to me."

"Mi awn sister! Tell 'er that 'er awn husband's gotten me into't family way wol she wor in her bed sick! . . . You're a devil, so y'are."

His laugh stung her again.

"Ay, tell 'er! She'll 'appen clear aht an' tak' thee with 'er! Ah've b—— well had enif of her puny, sickly, snivellin' ways, and o' thy back talk an' all. Ah've another woman all ready to come in, so if tha's brokken an afternooin at miln to trapse up 'ere and tell *me* thi troubles, tha's waasted thi time an' breath. Go on, nah," he added with an amused glance at her pitiable figure, "Ah'm bahn to lowse this bird,—so cut it, dost 'ear?"

Every word had come clearly to the two girls, sitting immobile in their sun-splashed retreat. They watched with concerned, puzzled eyes the thickened, childish figure go heavily, despairingly along the path that led downwards to the town; watched the dreadful man, cheap timepiece in hand, release the lovely, graceful bird and

follow its preliminary circlings, then its unerring flight across the sapphire sky.

Jennie was folding up her work. Her capable little hands were trembling.

"Come on," she said, gently shaking the twins to something like wakefulness. "Let's get away from here! I'd be flayed o' yon chap."

Veronica sprang up, closed her book and packed the children into the perambulator. They began to walk rapidly away, casting occasional timid glances at the sinister figure behind them.

At last Veronica spoke.

"Was she going to have a baby, Jennie?" she asked unwontedly hesitating.

"I expect so," replied Jennie, shortly.

"What a horrible man! She ought to have brought a knife and stabbed him," exclaimed her companion, vehemently. "Oh, Jennie,—perhaps she'll drown herself in the Tarn! I shall never like that bit of the moor again."

"Don't Ronnie! Let's try to forget it," advised Jennie. "Look at Albert's pinny, black with bilberry stains."

But Veronica's eyes were stormy, her lips tightly pressed. She could scarcely smile when the twins, at parting, put up their sweet, empurpled mouths for her kiss.

"Don't grow up into horrible men," she whispered, hugging them fiercely. "Beasts, some of them! Never be like that, darlings!"

Tea over, she sat quietly in the kitchen, watching her mother as she bent over the worn socks, darning needle moving rapidly. Strange thoughts pushed through her mind. She scrutinised Mrs. Quening's gentle face, unmarked by the stormy environment in which she lived. Was indifference, contentment, or resignation written there, she wondered? . . . She looked into a future, hidden by the mists of Time, each year a veil, rose-coloured, gold,—grey? What men, since men, it seemed,

had such ghastly power, would invade or dominate her life? As each of those dim veils rolled away, what faces would it reveal beside her own? It envisaged them, humble or tempestuously wooing. It could not be that all, or even many, were vile; if there were Quenings and brutes like the moor man, there were too, those who bore honour as a banner, like Brian Courage. Somewhere must be the Prince, that she, happy Princess, could follow "beyond the night, across the day." Where was he? . . . Was she doomed to pass her existence within the narrow limits that bound her mother? She winced at the idea. No, somehow, she must see the world! She thought of sleepy cathedral cities, of quaint Dutch towns huddled beside still canals, of glooming forest glades, of coral-girdled lagoons, of Norwegian snows and Spanish palaces. Her bright head glowed against the dark mahogany of the chair back, her brilliant eyes looked into the far-off but surely-coming years. . . . Enthralled, she saw them beautiful.

CHAPTER III

THE holidays were over.

Veronica was again at school, but now no longer did she turn along Caven Street to meet the St. Anne's rabble of other days surging towards her; no longer did she sit entranced at Mr. Courage's stories of breathless fights and deathless knights.

Instead, she bent demure steps along the broad Stepton Road, fringed by dashed-looking young trees, each enclosed in its neat iron cage, until she came to the old grey Grammar School with its playing fields around it.

She wore gloves and the new serge costume. Her waving hair was decorously braided in two long plaits, only the ends escaping beneath the black ribbon bows in wanton ringlets. If she munched an apple as she ran down Burling Lane, she was mindful to throw away the core before she turned staidly along the pavement fronting Machin Smith's house. Then she became one of a drift of little girls, floating, brown, crimson and green, like Autumn leaves along a stream, here and there among them a long twig of a governess, very stiff and unbending.

The girls, mostly smug, priggish offspring of men en route to being self-made, at first treated her cavalierly. She was a "Scholly,"—therefore to be snubbed. Had they not the impregnable prestige of fathers who scowled blackly over terminal bills,—of mushroom mothers who presided over "At Home" days in fearsome drawing rooms full of hideous furniture fungi? Were not they themselves in the position of being able darkly and spitefully to intimidate pathetic "generals" recruited from

cottage homes, and to insist on being addressed as Miss Alice or Miss Esther?

Some of them were pretty, but insufferable in their airs and graces; some, moderately clever, no less odious in their vain-glory. One and all they lacked, as do most natives of the broad-acred county,—that greatest gift of the gods—Imagination. Because of this want, Yorkshire still awaits its Hardy,—the Brontës who loved and understood, as none before or since, the bleak grandeur of their surroundings, are still foreigners and suspect to the great mass of West Riding folk.

Imagination, Veronica had, as well as undoubted beauty, and a naïve confidence that stood her in good stead in those early skirmishes from out of which she wrenched her eventual supremacy.

There was one girl, an offensive, pasty-faced little wretch who trailed behind her a cloud of glory in the shape of a father who was a Governor. Bertha Midgley must be propitiated, and Bertha Midgley was fast becoming a despot. Veronica did no propitiating, but speculated sometimes upon this Viceroy of a father, reigning autocratically over some far-distant outpost of Empire. Almost she envied this favoured child of fortune who had thrust upon her the chance of travel that she herself must somehow laboriously achieve. She pictured the anæmic creature borne by half-naked coolies in a ricksha under cloudless Eastern skies, or on ringing skates skimming the frozen rivers of some Northern land. . . . When it was explained to her ignorance that Mr. Midgley was merely a Governor of the School, her merriment knew no bounds. She laughed that sweet mocking laugh that helped to make her inimitable charm.

"How utterly funny!" she said, contemptuously, and from that hour Bertha Midgley's star waned to its setting. Veronica began to have a following among the more original spirits of the school. And she made a friend.

Miss Murgatroyd was British to her rigid back-bone. But as she taught French as well as English literature, she was called Mademoiselle. She was an earnest creature with pale hair arranged in a tea-pot handle, and a face engraved with a plan of the paths of virtue held down by a great paper-weight of a nose. It was the sort of nose one could never imagine being claimed in marriage, so suggestive it was of maddening snores. Nature had made a scanty apology for this outrage by giving Miss Murgatroyd a pair of dainty ears to which she strove to divert nasal attention by hanging in them long garnet ear-rings.

Miss Murgatroyd was kind; to beauty she was very kind; to brains plus beauty, worshipping. At Veronica's fresh young loveliness, she gasped. Then she discovered that her new pupil was clever.

It was in this wise.

The windows of the long classroom were wide to the late September sunshine. The day had been hot, and lassitude had degenerated into utter apathy. Only Mademoiselle showed energy.

"Come," she said briskly to the lethargic class when she appeared to take the English recitation,—Byron's "Ocean," for Miss Murgatroyd was romantic, and adored the works of the saddened amorist. "Come, let us take to-day the stanza beginning 'Thy shores are empires,' and endeavour to commit it to memory's tablets." Mademoiselle could be, on occasion, grandiloquent. "Read it aloud, Veronica," with a faint hope that the girl's vital young voice would rouse the somnolent class.

"I'm afraid I don't read that verse very well; I don't understand it."

"Non? Pourquoi? What is it that presents a difficulty to you, my dear?" with an encouraging smile.

"What is the meaning of the lines,—

> 'Thy waters wasted them while they were free,
> And many a tyrant since'?"

"I discern no insuperable obstacle to comprehension there," returned the governess, who, indeed, had read the lines with unruffled content a hundred times.

"I don't see how the ocean could waste a tyrant, Mamselle. Shores, of course,—but tyrants? It sounds absurd. Don't you think," with her delicious smile, "Byron meant 'washed'? I could understand Nero or Caligula going for a bathe, but how could the waters *waste* them?"

"And, come to think of it, how could they?" helplessly exclaimed Miss Murgatroyd, recounting the incident that evening to the teachers correcting exercises in their comfortless room. "The girl is uncommonly quick, that is certain, and she has a feeling for poetry. It seems almost too lavish of Providence to endow anyone with talent as well as such really—startling beauty," she added wistfully, fingering her large nose, and sighing over a heap of essays unmarked either by herself or originality. As she set to work with blue pencil, she envied the girl beginning life with such gracious gifts. Miss Murgatroyd was, in spite of her profession, quite human, and she, too, had her dreams. Alas! It was not in her power to apply to her nose Marcus Aurelius' suggestion, "Cut off those things that trouble or straiten thee" . . .

In Veronica's new life, the days passed like jewels dropping along a string. Saturday and Sunday, blissful because of the infrequency with which she encountered her father, were diamonds of crystal clarity. Monday, when the governesses were fitfully ill-tempered after the week end's emancipation, had opal gleams of brightness: the head-mistress took Form 4 for History and Geography. Tuesday was a topaz, full of yellow sunshine,—French, literature, singing. Wednesday and Thursday were agates, with utilitarian yet not unattractive lessons in Mathematics and Algebra, Cookery and Needlework. But Friday was a ruby, all couleur de rose.

On that day a compact line of older girls wound its way, governess-chaperoned, through the busy streets and halted before a great, bare, red building in Silver Street, sandwiched between the Primitive Methodist and Baptist chapels. This was the recently-built Technical School, where a heterogeneous assortment of boys to the number of four hundred received unwillingly the benediction of a gruelling education. The immense basement was filled with the looms of the Textile Department, provided that budding mill-owners and managers might learn the detail of their trade. (Fathers usually spoke of the institution as the Trade School.) On the ground floor were the class-rooms in which the ordinary scholastic curriculum was followed. And above these, like jam masking the nauseous powder underneath, was the Art School. This was the destination of the upper forms of the Grammar School girls; here, every Friday, in company with the upper forms of the boys' school, they received instruction in drawing from Mr. Appleyard.

Mr. Appleyard, the Art Master, as Veronica soon learnt, was a Character,—a Cure,—a Card!

He had a great red face and hands, and a bellowing booming voice,—butcher and bull in one. Yet Shem Swire, that admirable native of Beighlington, to whose unremitting efforts was due the marked efficiency of this pioneer of Trade Schools, knew that, too, he had a talent almost amounting to genius. And he made his pupils work.

Such was his magnetism,—sheer animal magnetism,—as he stood on the raised dais at the end of the long room filled with cold north light, his greasy, protuberant waistcoat powdered with chalk and charcoal, that forty sullen boys on his right, and forty prim girls on his left, would in the first five minutes of his lesson warm into enthusiasm. Grasping their shading stumps, they would bend flushed faces, informed with eagerness and gigantic effort over the Whatman paper stretched before them.

Girls trembled as the floor creaked beneath his gigantic bulk swaying towards them. When a rump-steak of a hand clutched their pencil and traced on their drawing telling strokes of fairy lightness and delicacy, they hugged themselves in ecstasy.

"A *leetle* more depth 'ere, Miss Quening, and a *leetle* more shading hoffer this 'ere leaf, Hi should advise," he would roar, spilling smiles and aspirates about her burnished head. "So,—and so,—d'ye see?"

"It looks quite different now, Mr. Appleyard."

"Ha, yes, my dear,—that's where the Hart comes in, you see, that's where the Hart comes in." And he would roll away to the next palpitating student.

Sometimes they would persuade him, he being the most genial of monsters, to take a bunch of coloured chalks in his bunch of fat fingers, and entertain them at the blackboard, whereon were pinned great sheets of rough paper. By the time he had dashed vague preliminary splashes of red and yellow on its surface, guesses as to the subject were rife.

"Bet you tuppence it's poppies in a cornfield," a gambling enthusiast would urge.

"Red-roofed cottages and Autumn trees," the girls would hazard, to Bannister Appleyard's delight.

And, lo! A faint strip of blue-green sea would appear, the red dots, russet sails burning upon it,—a yellow sunset sky hanging above gleaming yellow sands, with perhaps a couple of figures dark against them,— just an impressionist sketch where Impressionism was unknown, glowing with vigour and life. Then what whole-hearted applause to warm the Art Master's purple ears!

"Oh, lovely!" breathed the girls in soulful chorus.

"Prime!" came the boys' sturdy tribute.

And Mr. Appleyard, waving his hands deprecatingly, would say, "Honly a touch in the right place, young ladies and gents, that's where the Hart comes in!"

He loved a joke too. He dominated, yet tyrannised not; jested while he scolded, encouraged with eyes and voice and whole ponderous person.

He liked Veronica.

"Sharp little devil, I'll bet a bob," he would say to himself, artist eye approving the graceful pose of her figure, the rose-flush of endeavour on her softly-rounded cheek.

One day, soon after she had entered the class, a subject somewhat beyond her powers was given,—the drawing and shading of a torso of Hermes. She looked up from a dubious contemplation of her work to see Mr. Appleyard looming beside her.

"Bit beyond you, missie, hay? Left side of 'is body 'asn't got no call to stick hout farther nor t'right side, 'as it?" he bellowed, cheerfully.

Veronica gave him a brilliant, roguish glance from the corner of her eye.

"Well, sir, it might be just a little bigger," she retorted, slyly. "You see,—the left side,—that's where the Heart comes in!"

He roared his appreciation of this sally, patted her head so heavily that the caress was almost a chastisement, and, hey presto! another friend for Veronica.

But none of these new friends was able to oust Mr. Courage from the inner shrine of her affections. He quietly as was his wont, watched her steady development. To him she was that sweetest balm for many disappointments, and much unconsidered drudgery, a potential scholar whose early plasticity his hand had moulded. One gusty Saturday in November, meeting him close to the bookstore in Caven Street, she entrusted to his keeping a new secret. Vanished was her dream of becoming a great actress; with charming enthusiasm, eyes shining, hair wind-tossed under a white Tam o' Shanter, she talked of the day when she would be a famous painter. Mr. Appleyard had given her the opportunity of trying

her hand at water colour. Scarlet lake and rose madder and crimson alizarin spattered her conversation like the splashes on a palette. Her mother had promised her a box of paints for Christmas.

"Wouldn't it be lovely if I turned out to be an artist?" she questioned, eagerly.

"I have faith that you will, though you may not yet know through what medium. Come into this shop with me now, and I will get you a little Christmas gift too."

Five minutes later, she emerged with a neat paper parcel in her hand, containing the works of one Robert Browning,—and knew not that she had reached an epoch in her life.

Among the boys, swaggering, sullen, cunning, clever, energetic, lazy, at the Technical School, was one whose personality intrigued Veronica. He was a young German of seventeen, a slender, dark youth, quite upsetting to one's preconceived notion of bulging, over-fed Teutons. He had large, mournful eyes of a velvety blackness, and shining, jetty hair with a deep wave in it. He was one of the early victims of a new craze in Beighlington,—what Brian Courage called the "exchange and martyr" system,—in accordance with which, having satisfied themselves that in this case exchange would be no robbery (of themselves) a few advanced parents had "swopped" their Bobs and Bens and Bills for the Fritzes and Wilhelms and Gustavs of the Fatherland. By this means the former acquired a doubtful knowledge of the German tongue (the good Vater and Mutter and Kinder being all determined cheaply to gain English, which they were under the impression their visitors spoke, rather than to impart German) and the latter soaked up with immense gusto and facility a Yorkshire dialect, rich in meaty words and phrases, which later surprised them by its inadequacy as a substitute for English.

For a time, Veronica heard the dark boy alluded to only

as Polly Flinders. Seldom or never subtle in humour, West Riding boys are usually smart at providing nicknames of remarkable aptness. There was something about the German boy, a wistfulness, a delicacy, that suggested fireside dreaming rather than facing the rigours of everyday life. Veronica thought the name appropriate. One day she glanced in passing his desk at the name written in stiff German characters above his wholly contemptible drawing,—Max Linders. He was a romantic-looking boy; his pale face appeared aristocratic among the round, healthy ones of his companions. Half the girls were in love with him. All the boys scorned him utterly. From them, football-kicking, fighting, sport-loving, incomprehensible, he held himself rigidly aloof. As Mr. Craven had it, if their Joe was as much a Yorkshire pudding out of gravy in the Linders household as Max was a sausage divorced from its skin in theirs, he was indeed in parlous case. When it finally became known that Polly Flinders not only played the violin but apparently enjoyed it, the disgust of the boys was absolute. Flinders was a dotty ass. Flinders was sent to Coventry.

In this exile the girls visited him. His sad smile received their advances, but held and returned Veronica's. With her, as usual, imagination had its way, imagination, which, if sometimes it ran away with her, was yet a tireless steed that went never halt or lame. In her healthy sanity she yearned over Linders' gloomy loneliness. Her optimism, buoyant and breezy, balanced his precocious pessimism. His egotism was colossal, but as his English was not enough to betray it, she suspected it not. His selfishness was appalling,—but that, too, she did not fathom.

One Saturday in December when Veronica was thirteen and a half, she was sitting on the broad window-sill in the billiard room, as the untidy place was still called, looking out on the lane ankle deep in decaying leaves

which a bitter wind was fluttering into heaps beneath the gateway of the arch. The room was heated from the vinery furnace, and was full of pleasant warmth. Suddenly, she saw Max, walking, head bent, up the road.

On an impulse she tapped upon the window pane. He raised his head and she caught his melancholy, appealing smile.

"Why all alone? Where are you going?" she asked, pushing open the window and smiling down on him.

"For a walk," he replied in his stiff English.

"Alone? How dull! Why don't you get Sam Craven to go out with you sometimes?"

"Oh, behüte!" with a gesture of insufferable conceit that seemed to the girl the intensification of loneliness borne with sad resignation. "May I come in and speak to you?"

Veronica looked dubious. But her father was, as always on Saturday, at the shop in Craven Street. Her hesitation vanished.

"Yes, come in," she said. "There's a stairway just inside the gate. Come up here."

A moment later came his soft tap at the door. Max entered the room. Veronica was still perched high up on the window ledge, to which she had mounted by way of an old stool. He came and sat down on it and took her little hand in his. She noticed that the nails were not very clean, but the fingers long and musicianly. She liked the rhythmic movement of his finger tips as they slid over her wrist. She laughed shyly.

"Now we are alone," he said, glancing about the carelessly-littered room. "Unter vier Augen, as we say. You call it what?"

"I don't know," replied Veronica, beginning to feel slightly uncomfortable. "Tête-a-tête, I suppose, but that's not English, is it? I'll get down, and we will go into the vineries for some grapes, or you can come in and see my mother."

He rose. He was a tall boy. Suddenly, she felt his arms around her. She began to tremble. For the first time she felt sex as a power definitely to be reckoned with. He held her tightly for a long moment. Close beneath her she saw the warm depth of his eyes, like bits of dark velvet with queer red flecks in them.

"Be kind to me," he whispered. "I am lonely here," then swung her lightly to the ground. "Sieh, I would be a good Kindermädchen, nicht?" he said casually.

She could not answer. Something tumultuous within her seemed to choke ordinary utterance. Without seeming to notice her silence, he went towards the opposite window to look over the garden, now very desolate in appearance.

"What a queer old place!" he said, presently, beginning to rummage among the catalogues huddled about the long table, then flinging them aside. "In that cupboard there is what?"

"I don't know. I have never seen it open. I think the key is lost," she answered, indifferently.

He whipped a bunch of keys from his pocket. The third one he tried fitted the lock. The door swung wide, a musty odour came forth.

"Ach!" he exclaimed, peering in. "Some old books, that is all.

Veronica sprang forward. Almost filling the shelves were stacks of old magazines and books. She drew a long breath.

"Oh, Max, do please give me the key," she said, looking at him with lovely, pleading eyes.

He drew it off the ring and laid it in her outstretched palm.

"You must give to me a kiss for it," he said, very slowly, in his low, harsh voice.

Veronica flushed; then kissed him lightly and quickly. But the kiss that he pressed on her lips she never quite forgot. There was triumph in it, and something else,—

almost a hunger it seemed. A strange word came unbidden to her mind. "Ravenous!" Yes, there had been something devouring about that long, close kiss. How red his lips were! All at once her thoughts switched to a picture of the moorman, with his coarse mouth. How silly she was! Max was utterly different from him, the lines of his mouth fine and nobly curved. . . . Yet the thought persisted. . . .

Her father was coming along the path towards them.

CHAPTER IV

GEORGE QUENING stared at Veronica's companion with a silent attention that gave the effect of bluster.

"This yer feller?" he asked at last, gravely, turning to the girl.

"I am her friendt," interposed Max, haughtily, suddenly feeling several inches shorter, and exasperated at the consciousness of a blush.

Quening considered, twisting a hank of bast in his thick hands.

"Aw, one o' these 'ere German Fritzy-Gerties what gets yer pickshers put on mewsical boxes, are you? Well, an' what brings you to Beighlington, like?"

"I study here, though I cannot see what of interest in me you have, " replied the boy, resentfully.

"No, you wouldn't! Well, you see, I'm an 'umble working-man, generally wi' my finger nails full o' muck 'at this lass turns up 'er nose an' all at, an' Ah've getten my face glued to t' soil mooast o' t' time, but Ah'm nooan so thick 'at Ah connot see wheear all this welcome brother business wi' Prussia's bahn to lead us. Sneakin' in 'ere, nosin' in theear, aren't you?—factories, work-shops, schools, colleges, 'otels, theaytres. . . . An' us all blind, swallerin' yer messed-up lingo like toffee, an' buckin' abaht yer braains and yer gift for organnyzation, an' yer marvelous faculty for langwidges,—(an' no wonder, for yer could larn owt after that mak' o' stuff you grind aht natural),—an' born knawing all ther' is to be knawn abaht mewsic, an' what all, wol decent Britishers 'as gotten to call theirsels Herr Barmi or Signor Swelli or they'd nivver be yeared,—an' so it goes on! Mak yer laugh! . . . It

'ud mak' a cat laugh!" And he grinned sardonically, and spat disdainfully.

Veronica was speechless, rooted under this torrent of horrible eloquence. What a beast he was! What would Max think of him? She clenched her hands and stared hotly at him. If only he were not her father! What a beast! What an ignorant uncouth beast! And Max, how handsome, how righteously indignant as he answered!

"You are an ignorant, and your own Queen's dynasty you insult!"

"Ay, well," returned Quening, unperturbed. "She's a tidy old body, but Ah'd lig i' bed no less easy if yon old dame wor British, all t' same!"

Max gave a sudden jerky bow.

"Her Majesty is in Germany revered," he said, sententiously, gesticulating neatly in the direction he imagined his native land lay.

"Ay, shoo is 'ere an' all, but shoo's made a big mistake, for all that," retorted Quening with increasing good humour.

"I wonder you tell it to her not," broke in Max, heatedly, growing paler, as he became inwardly more volcanic.

"Ah, well, it's too lat' now, ony road. But shoo had too many bairns, that's t'long an' short on't. Stands to reason, shoo 'ad to find t'wenches husbands and t'lads wives! An wheears shoo looked for em as nat'ral as t'cat looks i't' saucer for milk?—Germany! . . . Germany! That's it! And that's t'nice soft-lookin' cushion they're all sittin' on, an' its stuffed full o' fireworks 'steead o' feathers, an' God 'elp 'em when t' cover begins to crack! . . . Ah'll bid yer good day, Herr Schmidt! Ronniker, tak' yer friend into't vinery, and' give him some grapes. . . . An' God send we'll give 'im an' his pals some sourer ones someday!" And with a shrug of his heavy shoulders, George Quening walked away.

Veronica, utterly crestfallen, glanced at her companion.

"You a curious father have," he said, with a pale smile. "But he is wrong! There will not be again a great European war."

Veronica tried to smile in return.

"He is not my father," she said, passionately. "Let's go into the fernery, Max, and I will tell you all about it."

The fernery was a little bower of greenery, pleasantly warm, massed with hundreds of beautiful ferns, banked between the tiled floor and the low roof thickly beaded with moisture.

Veronica seated herself on the edge of the stone tank, and Max, pushing aside the lacy fronds of maiden-hair and pteris, on the mossy brick coping near her.

"I was born in Venice," she began, abruptly. "I don't remember my mother, but there is a box upstairs, with lots of her things in it. . . . She was very beautiful."

"Ach, so, I am sure!"

Her heart warmed to him. Passionately she desired that he should think her of finer clay than the boor he had encountered. Her story lured her; she went on, filling in the pattern of her web, weaving deftly.

"There is a miniature; it has a border of pearls. She had hair like mine, the true Titian red, you know. They liked it that colour in the olden days, they used to dye it sometimes to get it, only they never could really, if it was brown or black to begin with; but in our family, it just was so." She stole a glance at her companion; his face was perfectly grave. She went on again. "Her name was Contratelli, Hermione Contratelli; it is a pretty name, I think. . . . Her father was a noble, he lived in Rome. He wanted her to marry a prince, but he was hunch-backed, and she would not. I got that from a diary that she kept. It has golden clasps and a coronet on the cover. Some of the pages are blotted—with tears." Suddenly the thought struck the youthful narrator that this precious document would be likely to be written in

Italian. But her friend's face showed nothing but interest. "He isn't very *sharp*," came her involuntary thought. She hurried over the thin place. . . .

"My father was an English artist. His name was Paul,—I don't know his other name. She ran away with him and they were married and lived in a studio in an old palace in Venice. That man," contemptuous gesture indicating the direction of the shop which she hoped had by this time again swallowed Mr. Quening, "that man was his servant."

If her companion opined that the uncouth individual referred to was a strange servant for a cultured English gentleman, no muscle of his face betrayed the thought.

"One day my father was bathing and was seized by cramp. His servant sprang into the water and after a terrific struggle rescued him. But Paul never really recovered from the long immersion in the icy water and gradually sank.—Into a fever, I mean! When he died, my mother was heart-broken, and felt that life held no more happiness for her. She dared not return to the Count, her father, who had disowned her. She had very little money, and was grateful to the servant for trying to save her husband. When she knew she was fading away, her one thought was how to provide for me, her helpless child. She married the servant, and I have always been called Quening. It is a horrible name, isn't it? . . . My stepmother, who has always been good to me, knows nothing of this. My father,—I call him that,—does not know that I have discovered the secret. . . . I can trust you, Max, can't I?" She turned to him the grave wistfulness of her face; it glimmered softly in the falling dusk.

"Ach, yes!" said Max fervently. "I am by your confidenz made very proud."

Veronica preened herself. Really, the story, slowly built up in many lonely hours, sounded amazingly

plausible. Max was evidently impressed. She crossed her slender feet, hating the clumsy, twice-soled shoes that clasped their patrician arch, and went on, dreamily.

"Some day I shall escape from these—uncongenial surroundings, I know. . . . Oh, Max, you at least have travelled from your home in Germany, you *have* seen something of the world." The longing in her voice rang true now. "But I,—oh, Beighlington! Think of mill chimneys,—and then of lakes covered with lotus blossoms, of coral reefs round blue lagoons, and sands all silver and pink with shells, and purple mountains sticking upwards into snowy clouds, and white palaces with stately highdalgos pacing their colonnades, or bowing low to ladies with immense dark eyes half-hidden by Spanish mantillas in which crimson roses are fastened! Oh!" clasping her small, nervous hands, "don't you want to see them,—all,—all, Max? Don't you?"

Max nodded.

"And Italy!" What eyes the girl had! They seemed to shine even in that shadowy place. "Italy, Max! . . . And olive groves and vineyards and lemon orchards,—and lizards slithering and darting about in the sun. The sun! . . . No smoke, just yellow, glittering sunshine! And the gondoliers singing,—why, *you* look like a gondolier, Max! I would love to be lying in a gondola wearing a robe threaded with gold like Desdemona's on the Shakespeare Calendar, and you playing your guitar —or violin—as we floated along." She paused, entranced on the vision. . . . The door creaked and Biggs peered into the fernery.

"Yer mar says tea's ready, and there's salary and crumpets. You've to tak' t'young gent up to t'house. Maister's gone ageean." He stopped, then added ingratiatingly, "An' fotch us a bit o' parkin down, if t' missus 'as a scrap to spare, Ronniker. Ah'm fair clemmed smelling it all t'afternooin, it's ta'en all t'taste aht o' me baccy."

Veronica sprang to her feet and laughed: the greying gloom did not show the rose-tint slightly deeper in the sweet curves of her cheek.

"Not a word of what I have told you, Max, you promise?" she whispered.

"So! You are my little princesschen," he returned, just touching her hand.

Then forgetting romance and that proud Venetian birth, she ran with her friend through the windy dark to the open cottage door, and tea, and mother, and warm, prosaic comfort.

And afterwards, when they had listened enraptured while Max cajoled three Sonatas of Beethoven from the recalcitrant piano;—when Mrs. Quening, fortified by a glass of her home-made rhubarb wine had arrived within a mile o' Edinboro toon;—when Max had written his beautiful foreign name in the girl's smudged birthday book, the large characters filling the whole space originally intended for at least three signatures, thus making it manifestly impossible for any other of Veronica's acquaintances to be born on February the eighth, and they had all laughed merrily over the inappropriate pendent verse

> "Sweethearts sing and kiss,
> But spouses sting and hiss."

Veronica went with him across the beams of yellow gaslight that barred the courtyard, her curls one moment gust-tossed gold, and the next magically ebon, to the gateway in the arch; where, suddenly and swiftly as she stood swaying in the buffeting wind, she felt the German boy's face close, close against her own. . . . He had kissed her again, and was gone down the quiet lane, the dead leaves rustling under his feet. . . .

"That's a bonny young fellow, Ronnie," began Mrs. Quening when the girl, cheeks glowing, re-enteerd the bright kitchen.

"Yes, mother. . . . Do you think Germans are bad?"

"Bad? Surely not, dear! I've met some very respectable Germans. At Boridge Castle, I remember, the second footman came from Brussels."

"That's not Germany, mother."

"Isn't it, honey? Well, you know best, I daresay. Anyhow, he was a fine young chap enough in his gold plush and silk stockings and powdered hair. Many's the dance I had with him in the old banqueting-hall there!"

"Brush my hair, mother, and tell me about when you were still-room maid at Boridge Castle."

Mrs. Quening sat down in her high-backed chair with its chequered print cushions, and began to undo the braids of bright hair.

"I was twenty when I went to her ladyship, and I'd hardly ever been away from Fallawton before. I didn't know there *was* such places as Boridge. You've never seen anything grander than Clough Castle, which isn't a castle at all rightly speaking, but more like a row of villas thrown into one house. Well, there was the park,—you could get lost there; at least, I remember when first I went, having a rare job to get out of it. And the deer! Lovely things they were, and would come right up to you with their solemn eyes staring. Going into the house by the East Front, you came to the grand entrance hall,—big as Dernier's, that was, with armour and swords and shields round the walls, you couldn't scarcely see them in the distance, and ghostly they looked. There was animals laying about the floor as large as life, tigers and such-like, and up the stairway two trams could nearly have passed. . . . Turn around a bit, dear, and let me do the other side. I've made it shine like a chestnut here. . . . Once a great picture fell down, it was a naked woman coming out of a wood, seeming to shiver, as well she might, poor indecent female. Some sort of a nymp' she was, the butler said, and sure enough she looked it, a regular imp! I used to think shame for it

to be there and often the clergy to tea in the hall. Well, it fell, and my lady was out of her sense with fear that it was a bad omen, and we all got into the way of waiting for something awful to happen, so that we went about as quiet as mice, jumping when the bells rang, and the footman watching every morning when the letter bag was taken in to see if there was any black-edged envelopes. One day, soon after, when the housekeeper went to my lady's room for orders, she was lying on the floor fit to kill herself crying and sobbing, and Celeste the maid running about moaning and wringing her hands. The housekeeper, Mrs. Ming, a very feeling body, felt her heart turn right over. 'My lady,' says she, 'has the ill-luck come then?' 'Oh, yes, yes, Ming!' sobs my lady. 'I knew it would, Ming, I said so when Mellysandy (that being the foreign female's name) fell down. Oh, Ming, Fido is dead,—dead!' And sure enough, her bloated poodle of a dog, what we all hated, had had a fit that morning and died. 'My lady,' says Mrs. Ming, near bursting, 'I'll come about the meanyou when you feel more composed.' And down she comes to the servants' hall and had hystericas, and Franz, the young German from Brussels, had to fetch up some of the '74 port to get her round. . . . Eh, those were grand days, Ronnie!"

"Tell me some more, mother!"

"Well, the state dining room, that was a splendid sight when it was all set out for a grand dinner. There was real lace, a foot deep, let into the tablecloth, which was as fine as satin. I've seen a thousand rosebuds go in from the gardens to do that table, all picked buds like they'd give threepence a piece here for, for buttonholes. There was a young lady kept just a purpose for such work, and a haughty madam she was in her olive silk gowns. My lady used to speak sort of slighting at her, but my lord was very civil. Big black eyes she had, and she'd flash them and her white teeth at him, when he went in to watch her setting out the flowers. They used

to talk French together, which none of us but Franz could understand: I've seen him come out red as a lobster, and Mr. Balsam the butler call him into his pantry, and then they'd laugh themselves hoarse together. Bless you, my lord and Miss Fanchette took no more notice of the footmen than if they had been green flies,—not as much? She'd take the vawses from Franz and Philip, and stick a bloom here and another there, very delicate and dainty, and laugh and chatter and call his lordship 'Buzzer," when they were by themselves. But when my lady was present, she belonged to The Deaf and Dumb Hospital. Well, she could make that table like fairyland; oh, she was a cunning one, was Miss Fanchette! One day, after she had finished it lovely in white carnations and roses, she swept them all off again anyhow, and stamped her feet, and had in just a lot of common 'sturtiums, red and gold and orange, and flung 'em down careless-like, yet so beautiful they looked like flames, and when my lord came in he gave a sort of gasp. 'Hello!' says he, in English, 'I thought it was to be white!' Miss Fanchette flashes round on him. 'Like her,' she says, in a hissing sort of way. 'Demure and innocent, you would have, is it not? But not to-night! To-night they shall be like me, hot, burning, passionate,'—and through the mirror Franz saw her catch at his lordship's hands. . . . And that was the last time any of us ever saw her,—next morning she was gone; Mr. Maconochie, the head gardener, did the decorations after that, and stiff they were, compared with Fanchette's. . . . And so's my arm stiff, Ronnie! There, it's high time you were off to bed!"

But Veronica lingered.

"I wish we were rich like that, mother," she said, wistfully. "I wish I could go to a house and see those fine things,—furniture and statues and pictures,—that picture you were telling me about,—was it very beautiful?"

"Beautiful, child? Don't I tell you it wasn't decent? A naked figure with a lot of untidy hair tumbling about!"

"Well, Eve was naked, mother. . . . I think she must have looked lovely—all white and soft in the green of the garden."

"Hush, Ronnie! Them aren't right words for a young girl to use."

"Don't you think bodies—beautiful bodies—should be admired then, mother?" persisted the girl. "I think they are sweet,—little children, so smooth and tender. And mine,—I like it when I come out of the bath, it feels like velvet,—I wish I had a long mirror that I could see myself in—not only my face——"

"Be quiet, Ronnie! You mustn't let your tongue run on that way,—it's——" She stopped suddenly, seeing anew the girl figure before her, the softly-swelling young breasts beneath the too-tight frock, the delicate curve of hips, the rounded, tapering arms. . . . "Perhaps you are right, dear,—perhaps that's the proper way to think of our bodies,—as something beautiful. . . . Only, when I was young, we were mostly taught to behave as though they weren't there,—even ankles and ears were thought immodest."

"Oh, mother, I think I am right," eagerly. "And it makes us take such care of them when we think they are precious. You said just now that Max is handsome. He is, wonderfully handsome. But his nails were dirty,—did you notice? Now I think that is wicked,—not to keep everything neat that God has made so perfect. It must disgust Him dreadfully, I'm sure. When I know Max better, I shall give him a toothbrush and a nailbrush and beg him to use them for my sake."

"You're a strange girl," said her stepmother, laughing.

"Some of it is Mr. Courage's strangeness then, mother. . . . He said when I left Burrow Street that I was going to be beautiful and that it was a great honour and charge to be made the custodian of beauty,—like keeping the Crown Jewels in perfect order. . . . Do you think I am pretty, mother?"

"Yes, I do, dear. . . . But I don't know as I ought to——"

"Oh, yes, you ought! Then that's two things I have got,—beauty and charm. . . . Just those two little coins, and with them I want to buy learning and travel and all the splendid sights I can cram into life,—and love!"

"You'll buy some of those, I reckon, girlie. . . . But you'll want another coin to buy that last if it's to be the real thing and not just imitation."

"What shall I want, mother?"

The words came in a whisper from where the girl stood lightly leaning against the deal-topped table; she looked slender and very graceful, the long plaits of burnished hair falling over each shoulder and budding bosom, past the slim waist. The widely-opened eyes shone in the small, intense face. Mrs. Quening sighed.

"You'll pay for that in its own coin,—with love, my darling, with love."

CHAPTER V

WELCOME the days came, and unregretted went. Three times more had Spring laughed until it glowed into Summer,—flaming Autumn burnt itself out in the grey ashes of Winter. Veronica was sixteen and a half. Christmas was approaching, and a row of shrouded puddings hung from the oat-cake rack in Mrs. Quening's kitchen. But first, the annual Prize-giving was to take place, when Veronica was to say farewell to school life at the Party,—the Upper Forms spoke of it as "The Ball,"—which was arranged for this twentieth of December in the big Concert Hall attached to the Technical Institute.

At five o'clock, Veronica was speeding down Burling Lane, her impetuous dancing feet disdaining the slipperiness of the film of frost that was scattering diamonds on the black pavement, and laying little bars of silver in the ruts of the road. In her hand she carried a brown paper parcel, and as she thought of its contents, she smiled.

She was breathless and radiant as she sped round the turn into Caven Street. There she paused a moment.

A labyrinth of mean streets spread about her; the moon flooded them and they were silver and ebony as water and trees in a forest glade. Veronica was not deceived. She had seen them too often in the crude noontide; braid they never so bravely their silver and black, she knew them for what they were, tawdry and sordid, slatterns at heart. "But there is the moor," she thought, and smiled on the comfort of it. Ever it rose the lovelier for the drab town that lay in its embrace; ever to Veronica, the solace of

it grew. She walked swiftly forward, and soon turned into the moon-barred gloom of Pattie Street, where, in order to evade paternal comments, she was to dress for the great event at Mrs. Dixon's house.

Jennie was hovering in the hideous, varnish-papered passage, dimly lit by a point of gas. She seized the parcel, dragged Veronica in, and shut the door.

"You've come then!" Jennie had a gift for embracing the obvious.

"Oh, Jennie, my frock! It is lovely! . . . Double puffs on the sleeves."

"Let's undo it in case it creases, and I'll lay it up in the chamber."

"Now, come along, you two, and get some tea. You don't want to get ready just yet," called Mrs. Dixon from the kitchen, where, a few moments later, they came upon her, baby at breast, big brown teapot in hand,—whilst the twins, now splendid specimens of manhood in tight velvet suits and pearl buttons, sat upon the rug superintending the brick-building operations of Jubilee Phyllis, their immediate successor.

"Beauties!" exclaimed Veronica, dropping down beside them and embracing them all vigorously. "Look at Phyllis's dimples! Aren't they adorable?" lifting the little rounded arm. "They remind me, how, when I was a tiny thing I used to say

> 'Little Miss Muffet sat on a tuffet,
> Eating her curves away!'

I feel as if I *could* eat these delicious curves, I am sure."

"Juby new jimmer," volunteered the little girl, archly, pointing to the scarlet ribbon that bound her sparse curls.

Albert and Herbert observed the young Eve coldly for a minute.

"She's very vain," disapproved Albert.

"Vein," smiled Jubilee, holding out her fat wrist and surveying the blue traceries with interest.

Mrs. Dixon glanced at the group, impatience and pride mingled in her regard.

"Pity you hadn't one or two on 'em at your house, Ronnie; they've gotten me fair wore out, I get narked with 'em sometimes," she sighed, buttoning her bodice over a glimpse of pink flannelette. "Come on and try a sardine."

They gathered about the table, a party of nine, two silent boys having sidled bashfully in from school, and brought four doubtful hands unchidden to the board. Mr. Dixon did not get home from the "miln" where he was a weaving over-looker, until six, and Gertie, the second girl, had just "begun" at Dernier's, where Jennie was now a reliable "skirt hand." The sardines and thick bread and butter and seedcake disappeared magically. The coarse cups and blue rimmed mugs were filled and refilled. Veronica enjoyed the brightness and homely gaiety, and felt, as she plied her tinny fork and consumed her share of the crusty, home-baked loaf, that the evening's happiness was already well begun.

"That there Jennie begged off for t' evening to help you get ready," smiled Mrs. Dixon, banteringly, dipping a crust in the strong tea and pressing it upon a gurgling baby.

Ronnie gave her friend a glance of gratitude.

"And I ordered the cab,—quarter to seven, sharp. Bill o' Sam's, the driver, asked if I thought he was the fairy queen, seeing he had to be at top Bevan Street at twenty to, and down Worle Village at ten to, and he nobbut has two cabs. So I gave him a sixpence, and he said he wouldn't fail you without he was driving himself to his own funeral by then," said Jennie, laughing.

She was a comely girl, with a round, rosy face, and her mother's kind brown eyes. Her chief aims in life were the serving of Veronica and the restraining of

Gertie's somewhat boisterous spirits. The last named arrived as they were finishing tea, resplendent in a tight bolero jacket worn with an antimacassar-like collar about the shoulders. She peered discontentedly into the empty sardine tin which Jonas was rubbing round with a piece of bread.

"Has Albert and 'Erbert had some of them sardines?" she asked, nodding ungraciously to Veronica. "You'll have them kids poisoned or bursted one o' these days."

"There's some on a plate for you in the scullery," interposed Jennie, mildly indignant.

Gertie, mollified, dislodged Jonas, protesting that his repast was unfinished, and sat down in his chair, pulling a crumpled "Rosebud Bits" from her pocket, and proceeded, apparently unhindered by a constantly-filled mouth, to regale her audience with spicy morsels: " 'Mrs. Pat Campbell was looking superb in a bertha of Venice point draped over her vuxe rose gauze.' What's 'vuxe' mean, Ronnie?"

"How do you spell it?" asked Veronica tantalisingly.

But Gertie had found something else.

" 'The beautiful Nathalie Brogue who was one of the recently-divorced Lord Coptenhall's summer guests on his yacht, the "Syren," has lately been accepting the escort of the heir to a Jukedom.' By! Don't them toffs go it?"

"Don't be vulgar, Gert!" protested Jennie.

"Vulgert," admonished Jubilee.

"Vulgar yourself," snapped Gertie. . . . "Well," as she lifted her skirt and shook the fallen crumbs into the hearth, "let's look at your frock, Ronnie, I'm going to 'East Lynne' to-night; I must be off soon."

The three girls ran up the stair to Jennie's bedroom, which appeared unwontedly festal. In the fireplace, looking unfamiliar and almost indecent denuded of its pink and silver paper shavings and red Japanese umbrella, a clear fire glowed cheerfully. On the bed, gay with its

crazy-work coverlet, and frowned down upon by a framed group of deceased Dixons surrounded by their funeral cards, lay the dress whose choice had almost worn Mrs. Quening threadbare. Its primrose silk folks shimmered over the cotton quilt.

"Golly!" breathed Gertie, almost hushed in admiration. "And bronze shoes! Look-see, Jennie! . . . Are these stockings silk?—Why, they're five eleven three, aren't they? And elbow length gloves and all! My words, some folks has all the luck!"

"Ronnie deserves it all, and she'll look lovely, I'm sure," said her sister, touching the soft pleats lovingly.

"Pity your hair's such a colour, though, Ron," complacently observed Gertie, taking a satisfied glance in the infinitesimal mirror. "Jet-black 'ud look best with that yeller. Well, I must 'op it. Toodle-oo!" And Miss Gertrude disappeared in a succession of crashes.

"Mother wanted me to have a spray over my shoulder, gardenias and maidenhair," said Veronica, elation growing on her, as Jennie arranged the burnished waves of hair.

"Oh, no, it's just per-fect as it is."

"That's what I thought," contentedly. "I've got my white petticoat on ready. That's the crochet frill you did me, Jennie; you are good to me."

"I love you ever so much, Veronica. I hope you won't never be tired of me, or think us too plain for you. When you begin teaching, you'll happen want a friend that talks finer than me," murmured the other girl wistfully.

"Oh, Jennie, what rubbish! As if I could ever do without you and Alby and Herby and dear little Phyllis!"

"Max is back from his soldiering in Germany,—but I suppose you've seen him. . . . Will he be there, do you think, to-night?"

Veronica blushed faintly. Jennie saw the delicate carmine steal over her friend's cheek, and sighed softly.

"Perhaps! . . . You are tugging me a bit!"

"Well, it's done now. Look at yourself. Will that do? Now, a black velvet band round,—or not? Ye-e-s," critically, "I think so. Where's your stockings and shoes? E-e-h, they are pretty with those little shining buckles. How small they are,—littler than mine, though you are taller! . . . You're sure they don't pinch you?"

Veronica, picking up her starchy petticoat, danced a few derisive steps. Jennie, laughing, waited, the primrose frock gleaming over her arm.

"This soft silk doesn't frow-frow much, but I like it champion," she said, thoughtfully, slipping the garment over the debutante's shining curls, and beginning dexterously to encase her in its delicious tightness. How whitely her neck, and arms bare to the elbow, glimmered in the poor gaslight! How her eyes shone and danced as Jennie patted and pulled and coaxed with puckered brow and primly-folded mouth! And how gaily she flung her arms round her friend and kissed her, and flashed down the steps at the thrilling announceemnt in Mrs. Dixon's pleasant voice, "T' cab's comed!" Then she was at the door, and out in the sharp nip of the winter air, which could not quite drown the scent of whiskey borne to her as Bill o' Sams's leaned downwards with his politely facetious enquiry, "Weer to, miss?"

As in a dream she was whirled through the sparkling streets, and deposited at the foot of the broad steps unfamiliar in their red baize covering, and under a gay-striped awning. Surely, still it was in a delicious dream that later, she came stepping down from the palm-decked platform, her arms upholding a veritable tower of books, —fat red books of travel, thinner blue ones of biography, two green ones, "Mill on the Floss" and "Esmond," and, at the very top, just under her nose it came, where she could sense the exquisite pungency of its gold-brown binding, the delirious music of Percy Bysshe Shelley,—almost enough to make one tolerate that intolerable name, Percy, barred long ago with Claude and Cuthbert from her list

of possible names for dream suitors. With flushed cheeks and sparkling eyes she tumbled her armful of treasure down on the seat beside Miss Murgatroyd, whose tea-pot handle seemed more colourless than ever, and who was looking painfully scrubbed and neat in a small-waisted, frilled-skirted green nun's veiling. . . . Snatches of Sir Shem Swire's kindly speech came to her, a glimpse of his genial face behind a curtain of asparagus fern and nodding swansonia. . . . "Proud of this gifted girl. . . . every success. . . . more of her in the future. . . . uplifting example. . . . not to be forgotten,"—and suddenly, a tumultuous, overwhelming outbreak of hand-clapping, heroically and rhythmically reinforced to her gloves' breaking-point by dear Mrs. Bannister Appleyard, gorgeously overflowing her bright blue gown, a beautifully-painted miniature the size of a small clock bouncing madly on her heaving bosom. . . .

The distribution of awards continued. The dazzle subsided, and Veronica glanced about the room. Over a hundred girls were ranged round it. Nearer the doors, or close beneath the platform, banked high with flowers and reckless in a display of art muslin, were the masters and boys from the Technical School. A few old boys grouped themselves superciliously, conscious of superiority. She threw a smile to Max Linders, superbly arrogant in a new dinner jacket and high collar. His hand looked brown against the white kid glove he carried; his military service over, he had accepted a post as Foreign Correspondent in Sir Shem's factory. . . . How happy she was! If mother could see her now in her hour of triumph. She sighed and smiled. How dear the girls were! How patient and angelic the governesses. She touched Miss Murgatroyd's hand in grateful love; flashed the radiance of her smile into Mrs. Appleyard's huge, kind face. There, by the door, was Mr. Appleyard, only a shade more tremendous than his good wife. He wore a black tie, shop-made, and had a scarlet silk corner of

handkerchief carelessly disarranged in the fold of his dress waistcoat. His shiny shoes were obviously too small; he kept rolling from one to the other, but the benignity of his great face never wavered. She caught his glance with the amusement that always bubbled up in her as she met the familiar beaming brightness of his right eye, the fixed and critical stare,—relic of a cricketing contretemps in boyhood's days,—of his left.

At last the prizegiving was over, and the band,—piano and violin and 'cello (miraculously hidden among the palms, so that one could imagine the music welling from a fairy glade, instead of from Smith Harrison's Select Trio at fifteen shillings per head nightly, with refreshments), began to play "Whisper and I shall hear." After that, Veronica's bliss grew almost unbearable. With what pride she saw Sir Shem's small, compact figure bowing before her, and heard his stupefying request that he might have the honour of inspecting her programme, and found herself being gently directed to a place in a set forming for Quadrilles! How delicious the abandon of being swung off one's feet by one's vis-a-vis, M. Dupuis the French Master, and set down dizzily upon unaccustomed high heels upon the holland-covered floor! How bewilderingly sweet the compliments that fell, like bright confetti, about her! And, unutterable joy, how ecstatic the moment when she felt Max Linders' arm about her waist and heard his low murmur of felicitation as they swept whirling together over the softly-swaying floor!

Veronica could dance. Even Sir Shem, easily the lightest and most agile dancer in the room, admitted that. At sixteen, she was a shade over the average height, and, as she had always been without any awkward age, extremely graceful. Her bones were small, her hands and feet fine and delicate; her slenderness had nothing in common with thinness. She floated lightly and untiringly round the spacious room, swaying graciously as a wind-

flower, daintily-perfect from bronze head to flying bronze-shod feet.

Then at last the incomparable hours were sped, and she was seated beside Max in the jolting, musty cab, while opposite, Mr. and Mrs. Appleyard proudly nursed the prize volumes and beamed fatly upon her in the darkness. And in ten minutes, she and Max were out on the frosty pavement in front of the Dixons' house, and he was whispering hurriedly.

"You know you are still my little princesschen; you have not forgotten me, nicht?"

"Oh, Max,—but you must forget all that dreadful rubbish I told you. I wish I could stop making things up. Of course, horrid as father is, he *is* my father."

"It does not seem really possible. Who knows?"

Veronica was suddenly grave.

"Possible or not, it's true. . . . So don't be thinking of me as a princess any more, Max dear!"

"Always I shall think of you as my queen, queen of my heart and home as I want you to be,—Vera, Vera! Kiss me and tell me you care!"

"Of course I care. What a goose you are, Max! . . . There, I must go, Jennie will be waiting up for me. And —why,—all the house seems lit up. . . . Whatever are they having the front room gas on for?" she exclaimed; and suddenly for no reason at all, felt a wild little tremor of her heart. Without another word, she ran swiftly up the whitened steps, and very quietly opened the door.

"Mother!" in quick surprise, as the unexpected, familiar figure was disclosed in the passage.

The kind arms held her close for a moment. She began to tremble violently.

"What's the matter?" she whispered.

Mrs. Quening drew her very gently into the sacred front room and shut the door. Her eyes were red and her face blotched with purple.

"Ronnie," she said after a long, palpitating moment, taking the load of books from her step-daughter's arms and arranging them very precisely round the chenille-bordered serge tablecloth. "Ronnie, I have something to tell you, love,—something very sad, dreadfully sad and sudden." She stopped and wiped away the slow tears that were falling with tiny thuds on "Esmond," leaving yellowish spots on the green cover.

"Go on!" said Veronica, face pale as her Shetland shawl.

"Little Jubilee Phyllis,—oh, Ronnie, Ronnie, you won't ever be able to play with her any more,—little Phyllis is dead."

Veronica just stared. Only her legs began to shake, to shake so terribly that she sank very quietly down to the hearthrug,—and the body that had been as light as thistledown now felt one heavy intolerable ache.

Mrs. Quening went on in that strangely flat voice. "They came for me. . . . Jennie came. . . . I had finished ironing the muslin valance for your bed,—I thought mebbe I'd cook a sausage for supper, . . . and Jennie came."

"Yes?" gasped the listener.

"She was a pretty little thing." ("Was," already! Veronica shuddered). . . . "Such little taking ways. . . . You know how she used to turn things sort of quaint. . . . You remember that day when I said, 'That's my opinion.' And the darling said, 'Juby got a pinny on too.' . . . And how she'd try and imitate them lads whistling and singing. . . . Oh, I can't believe we'll never have her up the lane again, helping you to pick currants and rasps."

"How?" whispered Veronica; strange that it seemed impossible to utter more than just one bald word.

"Oh, Ronnie!" began Mrs. Quening again after another burst of tears, "she fell downstairs, the little pet! She had climbed right up to look at the fire in Jennie's

bedroom they think, the drugget was loose,—a stair rod had slipped out,—she must have stumbled over that. . . . Jennie was washing up in the scullery,—when she got to her, the poor mite was breathing, but they could see she was badly hurt. The doctor was just next door at Mrs. Lumb's first,—he came directly,—but . . . she only lived a few minutes."

Veronica lay very still on the rug. She did not weep. The pale yellow silk of her forgotten finery and the deeper gold of her hair fell across the coarse dyed sheepskin. She smelt its greasy, sickly odour. She had danced. . . . had eaten sandwiches and tarts. . . . whilst Phyllis, tiny, dear Phyllis, had lain broken on the dingy oilcloth out there at the foot of the narrow stair. Little Phyllis, with her dimples and her lisp and her adorable small vanities. How she had laughed and glanced from the corner of her eye and tried to shake the inadequate curls over the down-bent merry face! Phyllis was dead; the cheeks were white that had been so sweetly carmine. Never again would she give that provocative glance from half-closed, bright brown eyes. . . .

The minutes passed, Mrs. Quening looked steadily and pitifully at the stricken figure wrestling with this new, age-old misery, striving, as all must, to plumb the unfathomable, to probe the great secret, to accept the law, so strangely, wildly unnatural.

"Honey," she said at last, and the girl got quietly up and passed out of the room. Half hidden beneath the fringe of the disordered door-mat, lay a crumpled scarlet ribbon. Veronica stood for a moment gazing stupidly at it,—the next, the tears were dripping through her fingers on to its paper flimsiness.

"You will go up—and kiss her—now?" And Mrs. Quening led her to the hushed room.

Mrs. Dixon sat beside the bed, and her husband, a sturdy-set man of fifty, stood near. Neither of them was weeping, and Veronica, looking on that exquisite form,

was suddenly calm too. The child lay, no longer a rose but a snowdrop, just a sweet blossom that had gone to bloom in a less harsh, less unlovely spot. No devastating illness had marred the fair roundness of limb, or shadowed the lustrous brow and cheek. Veronica gazed and gazed. Then this was death, this sweet serenity? The Terror had come in gentle guise indeed. . . .

"Why!" she said at last in a wonder-shaken voice. "It's only for ourselves we are crying!—we couldn't ever cry for her, could we?" And she leaned the beauty of her awed face above the greater beauty of that other, so strangely, sweetly content, with its haunting, elusive, mysterious smile, as of question for ever stilled in some rapturous, radiant reply. And when she turned to the others, behold, on all shone a faint reflection of that enchanting, exquisite smile.

Then she was in another room in Jennie's arms, comforter and comforted; and in a little while both were soothing anguish greater than their own,—hushing the wild outburst of Gertie,—"It's all my fault,—I killed her! . . . I saw it,—that there loose rod,—I wouldn't stop to put it right,—I wanted to get out,—oh, Juby, Juby,—I didn't think,—I didn't know!"

Poor Gertie! Hers was the hardest part that night. The stricken father and mother would mourn,—grievously mourn indeed,—but the rough sincere sympathy of neighbours would ease the first passion of sorrow, and the daily, hourly needs of the baby and the twins and the schoolboys would make time for fretting mercifully brief. Jennie and Veronica for months to come would pause at some recollection of their little playmate, and dewy green eyes would look into wet brown ones with a quick gush of regret and pity. The two silent schoolboys would lead the already-forgetting twins along Stepton Road on fine Sunday afternoons to the ordered cemetery that was a Sabbath promenade; and would be more silent than usual as they read the sad black lettering on the plain stone;

and Alby and Herby would poke fat fingers into the hollows that marked the dead child's name. . . . "Jubilee Phyllis. . . . aged two years and five months." . . . and wish they might lift the glass cover and touch the china flowers of the "pot wreath" . . . And a year later, someone would suddenly say in unnatural, flattened tones, "On Wednesday it will be a year since. . . ." And Jennie would write out the time-honoured "In Memoriam" verse for the Beighlington News:

> "We mourn for her in silence and her name we oft recall,
> Though there's nothing left to answer but her photo on the wall."

And nobody in Number 7, or any other number in Pattie Street would deem it anything but appropriate and decorous; if Veronica, reading it, felt inclined to smile at its absurd banality, a sudden shame and thrill of memory would give instead an added wistful gravity to her face and she would whisper, "Little Phyllis! Little Darling!" and would run upstairs and take a stained scarlet ribbon from her glove box, and sit awhile, pondering and abstracted.

But Gertie! . . . She would do as Jennie advised and keep the secret of her fatal carelessness from the parents whose grief it could only increase. But all her life,—when the idle chatter of the shop fell into a momentary lull,—at the occasional sight of the laughing, sidelong glance of a child,—at the sound of some infant voice lisping the songs the dead babe had loved,—Gertie would feel the burden of an aching remorse. She had done it,—she had set those stumbling little feet on the bleak track that led to a vast, far country. . . . such a long, long way for Jubilee Phyllis, aged two years and five months, to venture alone. And a poignant, vain longing would for a moment wipe out the commonness from Gertie's face and leave it beautiful.

CHAPTER VI

IN January of the New Year Veronica went back as student teacher to the bleak school in Burrow Street and to the warm stimulation of Brian Courage's humanity. Guided by the predilections of the man she cordially esteemed, she began to read with discrimination, whereas, heretofore, she had seized with avidity any and every book she came across. Long ago she had imbibed such favourites as "Under Two Flags," "Cometh up as a Flower," "East Lynne," and "Coming thro' the Rye," as well as others even more thrilling, named with a delightful similarity,—"Her Love and His Life," "Her Face or Her Fortune?"—these were generally quaintly written in the First Person and Present Tense, so that the reader had the impression of the heroine stealing a moment from the most passionate embrace to jot down, "I blush vividly," or from some harrowing experience to perpetuate "My heart is beating suffocatingly." Assimilated chiefly in the short, snatched intervals rendered possible by a somnolent needlework instructress and a screening desk lid, beneath which one was occasionally able to secrete a head,—even a noticeably coloured one, for five minutes at a stretch, the effect of these was ephemeral. Though one returned to one's pillow case seam with moist eyes, so that the girl in the next desk would murmur sympathetically, "Where have you got to? . . . Oh, isn't it lovely just there?"—and one could but nod speechlessly for the lump in one's throat, the next pages speedily effaced the impression of those gone before. . . . Once a brave spirit introduced "David Copperfield" to the little group of girls who were recognised as readers,—David and his adorable

friends, and lovely little Em'ly round whose gentle head floated a something vaguely mysterious and wicked, exactly what, no one, not even the first brave spirit, seemed to know. But the rumour gave piquancy to a dish admitted to be rather indigestible in parts, though delicately titillating in others.

David's gentle hand drew Veronica into the larger embrace of his creator, and one long winter was made shining and glorious for her by him and Mr. Bannister Appleyard, at whose house she discovered a full set of Dickens, which, one by one, she bore to her home in Burling Lane, and one by one bore back and begged the Art Master to read. He roared with laughter at the suggestion.

"Hay, Ronnie, I nobbut bought 'em at a Hauction because t' bindings matched t' front room wall paper, and dang me! if t' missus didn't go an' 'ave it done red varry next summer. Hi've nivver been able to thoil them books since, for that green does look hawful wi' this 'ere scarlet. You can keep 'em if you want, H'im sure! Tell you truth, Ronnie, the one at the top o' t' pile were called Sketches by Boz, and 'anged if I didn't think they were picture books. But bless you, I never read nothing bar t' anglin' column i' t' Yorksher Weekly."

So Veronica revelled in the richness that lay stored within those verdant covers, and spent many felicitous hours seated on the polished steel fender of the kitchen, while her mother rested with her sewing and accepted the morsels flung to her on the girl's vibrant voice. And in her quiet bedroom she laboured over a set of illustrations for Dombey and Son, and a spirited solution to the mystery of Edwin Drood.

But now under Brian Courage's guidance, new delights were laid bare. He lent her of his treasures, gave her of his illuminating intensity and deep convictions. Over Jane Eyre she had already sighed. Now she read with passionate sympathy all the works of the incomparable sisters. The wide moor that to their starved hearts had

been birthright, its secrets her hands too might wrench from its cold, dark breast. Something there was in its illimitable patience, its defiant braving of tempest and snow that brought a feeling of deep security to the girl. "I want other things as well," she thought often, "colour and sunshine and the thick heavy perfume of tropical flowers and the splendid flashing wings of strange birds,—but I shall always want to come back to the moor, too,—always, even when I have all those things, I believe a bit of me will want to be here, and feel the keen, clean wind blowing across miles of grey wold." And, looking into the years to come, she knew a pang of the heart hunger that smote Emily Brontë when no longer she could feel the chill Northern breeze lash about her frail body.

To the schoolmaster's satisfaction, Veronica held Wuthering Heights impregnable,—not all Charlotte's witchery could storm her pale sister's fastness.—"It was so ordinary of Charlotte to marry a curate," was her laughing comment one day as she and Brian came down the hilly street from that dreary parsonage set like a boulder on the bleak wold.

Brian looked thoughtful.

"Do you think she could be ordinary, Veronica mine?" he asked, very gently. "Don't you see her there when Emily and Anne had left her, when the voices she had loved that had mingled with hers in song and story, came yearning to her on the sad wind,—and she knew that soon hers would be one with theirs again? Can you not see her lay down her pen and listen to that wistful sound, and with aching throat lean out to grasp those phantom hands,—oh, Veronica, not ordinary, I think, dear!" And he began to quote from Harriet Spofford's poignant poem:—

"'What memories nestling in her heart
With wild sweet wings of longing start!
The things they touched—with awful art—
The clock's dull tick, the walls, the doors,

The very shadows on the floors,—
The old smiles wake an aching fret
Barbed with the poison of regret,—
There are two ghosts within her heart.

"'There are two ghosts upon the stair.
Long since Fame spread his splendid snare;
Love came and camped about her there.
Oh, love was sweet and Life was dear,—
But hark! those voices loud and clear,
They wail, they thrill,—she must not stay,—
Out to the open, and away!
Oh, Love past Death and Death's despair,
There are three ghosts upon the stair!'"

He finished on a sombre note, and Veronica turned to him impulsively, her eyes shadowed by tears.

"Yes, there are!" she said, "but they do not linger on the stair. They only waited there for her, banished until she was ready. Now they are all out on the moor, hand in slender hand, their long hair blowing on the wind. . . . And the streams sing the songs they taught them, and the waterfalls laugh their little, sobbing laugh, and the trees bend their heads and endure,—as they endured. Yes, you are right, Mr. Courage,—and I, I love them all."

"Yes, I think their spirits are there still, dear. Keep on loving them, Veronica, it is a love that will make you very rich," answered Brian, taking her hand for a moment in his. . . .

But between Thackeray and Dickens she refused to choose, "Some days I want chocolate creams,—that's Agnes Wickfield; but more often I long for the crystallized ginger of adorable, naughty Becky Sharp. I have moods when Becky is very akin to me."

"I think she's more like burnt almonds,——Miss Becky leaves a slightly bitter taste behind her," said Brian, laughing.

When he placed in her hands a translation of "Les Miserables," he did so with some hesitation.

"I would like to keep this until you can read it in the original, Veronica. Let it be an inspiration and a spur to urge you to master French, so that you may really read Hugo's lovely lyrics, for no translation can give their beauty. But read this now, for it is, I think, the sublimest monument of pity in any language."

Next to Brian Courage's bookshelves,—nests of singing birds,—Veroncia's greatest treasures lay in the long-locked cupboard that Max Linders had opened for her on that winter day several years before. She spent delightful hours over the piles of yellowed Blackwoods and Temple Bars, the bundles of novels collected by some epicure to be plats in her feast,—Pride and Prejudice, Northanger Abbey, The Lancashire Witches, Woodstock, The Woman in White, Consuelo and the Three Musketeers. She never knew who had prepared the banquet for her delectation, but blessed the donor of the bounteous table with more sincerity than ever she put into the gabbled, childish grace, "For what we have received, make us truly thankful, Amen." No necessity for the creation of true gratitude here, her heart brimmed with it. Long, delicious summer Saturday afternoons slipped away for her as she sat in a curve of the great moor, listening to the whisper of the wind in the belt of trees that girdled the tarn, or watching the amber bees busy above the purple heather. She forgot her father's capricious temper, the monotony of her home life. She scoured the desert and cruised the seven seas as she lay and dreamed in the gentle hollow where the butterflies drifted over the delicate, quivering grasses, till the sun slid down the stainless sky to cradle itself in the tender green of the west. . . .

But the realms of poetry were the enchanted lands. Oh, the dream voices that came to her from those magic shores!

> "The holy time as quiet as a Nun,
> Breathless with adoration."

Soothing and healing there for rebellion surging in her hot, passionate young heart! Wordsworth's too, the line that brought great Milton "like a meteor streaming to the wind" flaming into her ken, —

"Thy soul was like a Star and dwelt apart."

Oh, music of the spheres, indeed! Oh, glorious gift of books,—and books!—hidden strings of secret harps that Fancy's hand could pluck at will, releasing the quivering notes in harmony. Arnold's noble words passed like a procession of banners, stately and splendid. In the songs of Shelley and Keats and Byron was the joy and the sweet despair of youth. And of music in the minor key came the tender love call of Elizabeth Barret Browning, and the deep note of Arthur Hugh Clough that in the same year had fallen on silence; and Blake's country dancers tripped in the maze and sang; and Swinburne lay in a blossom-filled boat by an enchanted lake of pearl; and from the grey dust of the British Museum, O'Shaughnessy plucked his fabled aloe flowers and wove them into a perfumed wreath. . . . Oh, glorious gift of poesy, indeed!

Came, too, the knowledge of sexual things. She became aware, how, she scarcely knew, of women, even young girls, who nightly haunted the purlieus of Station Street, where the theatre shed its blazing lights; hard-faced women, their painted cheeks and intensified lips, and eyebrows accentuated to an eternal note of interrogation, marking them from decent, with-drawing folks. Slowly, unconsciously, she grew to recognise them as man-lures, prowling about their horrible livelihood. How did she learn it? Impossible to remember,—by the pursing of her stepmother's lips,—by wise Jennie's sudden absorption in a distant nothing,—by the tenderly-saddened tones of Brian Courage's voice—"Ah! Beatrice Shadd,—she left school when you were in Standard Five, Veronica,—

poor girl,—poor girl!" Draggled souls, these,—they "dwelt apart" too, low fallen stars that had forgotten how once they shone. . . . Sometimes this "man-power," its mightiness only half realised, made her suddenly afraid. Who could know another, though that one's bosom friend? What secret desires stirred in the breast of Gertie, as she bared her full-busted body for her toilet in the little bedroom in Pattie Street? . . . What terrible energy, forced downward, still bubbled up in Max as he caught her to him in a sudden, hateful, yet alluring half-stifling embrace? . . . What dreams nestled in Jennie's brown eyes as she lifted them flutteringly to recognition of half-heard question? . . . No, here at least, the dreams were pure, maternal brooding over a little, dark-haired, close-cuddled form! Yet,—and the thought sent swift blood surging to Veronica's cheek, and forced her heart to a thudding beat, loudly hammering;—even that outcome implies first the satisfaction of those strange cravings, the surrender of self, maiden barriers down. . . . One thing remained,—choice of yielding. That must be a right, close-guarded, hedged about from casual invasion, a supreme gift to be rendered alone to one, and that one the well-beloved. . . .

So passed two more years. The South African war had waxed and raged and waned. Scarcely less remote to Veronica seemed Paardeburg and Magersfontein than Creçy and Agincourt. . . . A run on the works of Kipling in the Free Library. . . . A few wild spirits gone for ever from the sooty environment of Beighlington, to the loudly expressed envy of those who were smut-bound for life. "Heroes!" ran the ripple of admiration along the thronged streets as they marched past. "Heroes, my eye!" laughed big Ted Craven, of misleading patronymic. "Some of these 'ere old bluffers seem to think we're goin' out there to bolster up the shady doings of big-nosed Ikey I.D.B.—Bah! Not one of us but thinks ours a slushy job compared with those old goat beards' out

yonder defending their homes and rights. Heroes! Not on your life! It's fun we're out for,—P.H.U.N., and don't you ferget it, old son!" . . . Poor Ted! He had his short-lived "fun." Ere a year had gone, the wind of the wide veldt blew over the hastily-hollowed trench that was his lonely grave. . . . After the departure of the contingent,—a few Patriotic Concerts with the Mayor in chain of office and the Mayoress in rustling silk on the platform; just the faint, far reverberation of the shock of horror and surprise than ran over the country as stiff lips murmured, "Lost guns? . . . Ours? . . . Not ours? . . ." Then the life slipped on again, life, full and complete,—Books,—Brian; Music,—Max; Jennie and home and dreams. Dreams, most real of all. . . . Not until long afterwards, when she sat entranced above the pages of "The Dop Doctor," did Veronica realise the nearness, the glorious, throbbing nearness of those who went for fun and stayed to fight that lingering, bloody fight across the sundering seas. . . .

In the September following her eighteenth birthday, Veronica entered the Sinodun Training College as head student.

The staunchest admirers of the Thames will not deny that below the proud beauty of Oxford, and above the sophisticated charm of Goring there is a stretch of a few miles when the river of their eulogies is less interesting. Like a lovely child that passes through adolescence of plainness to blossom later into undreamed-of grace, the stream wanders past the flat land where stands the old town of Sinodun, which, from days of famine and rapine and siege and battle, has won to a somnolent peace, yet bears still for all to see, many a mark of those red days on its old grey walls.

When Veronica for the first time rattled in the leisurely station omnibus through its narrow streets, she felt a thrill of gratitude to Brian Courage, who had chosen this

southern destination in spite of her stepmother's remonstrances at the unnecessary distance. "If she were ill. . . . and near a river too. . . . You won't go boating, now, and there'll be a lot of mist; you must wear your long-sleeved vests." Yet here she was, sitting with rapidly-beating heart and pink cheeks, opposite a frightened-looking girl whose fringe curled stiffly above gentle eyes and surprised brows, in the ramshackle 'bus that was at the moment trundling down between the huddled houses and shops of the High Street. There was a Georgian mansion, flush with the pavement; there, tucked away in a blazing garden, a possible Tudor one. And beyond the ribbon of the river with its alders and reeds, hung a primrose September sky across which the thinnest veil of pearly gauze was drawn. In another minute they were bumping across the fine old bridge and mounting the ascent that was too slight to prevent the January floods from submerging the neighbouring fields.

The pale girl opposite spoke suddenly.

"I believe I'm going to be sick!" she gasped.

"You are nervous," soothed Veronica. "We all are, I daresay. Take my smelling salts. . . . Better? That's right. I'm excited, too, but excitement makes me red, not pale."

"You are so pretty. I've been thinking so all the time; it's an ordeal to meet a lot of people when one is plain."

"Why, how ridiculous! With all that beautiful brown hair, so silky and fine."

"Do you like it, really?"

"Indeed I do. But you should not arrange it so severely. I will show you——"

Then they were jerked suddenly aside into a short avenue and immediately saw the red brick building that for two years was to be home to them. A moment more and Veronica and her new friend were standing out on the gravel sweep before a great, open doorway, whence came the surge of girls' fresh, excited voices. . . .

Veronica soon decided that Tuesday was the most tolerable day in Sinodun College.

It began as all other days when the rising bell clanged loudly and scattered a hundred girlish dreams in a hundred bare cubicles,—cubicles that offered little privacy, since, by standing on the solitary rush chair one could borrow Hinde's curler from the upstretched fingers of the girl beyond the seven foot partition. But as one yawned and hastily pulled on one's stockings, a pleasant thought obtruded. Tuesday! . . . no porridge. . . . sausage. . . . and marmalade to eke out the tiny roll of butter that was often so suspiciously shaded and striped as to explain the hoary gibe, "I've got a bit left over from Friday in mine,—it was lemon coloured that day,"—though all knew that only direst extremity of malaise ever saw the smallest morsel abandoned. Then an emergence from numbered doors of the girls from E dormitory to meet the stream from D dormitory on the bare stone stair, and a straining of belts and settling of ties of mannish severity, which occupied the considerable journey into the dining hall. Next, a scrambling to places at five long tables running down from the shorter one for Principal and governesses on the raised dais, under the three high, pointed windows gloomed by the great trees from which the owls called hauntingly at night.

There Veronica would seat herself beside a stodgy, uncongenial girl who sang hymns with unbearable lustiness, and beside whom she was doomed to eat for two enormous years, because, forsooth, the uncouth creature had had the carelessness to choose a father of the name of Queed, and must perforce sit alphabetically next to Veronica. "Now if I had really been called Contratelli, as I used to pretend, I might have eaten nearly two thousand meals beside that nice Courtledge girl, with whom I drove from the station. I don't believe there is a single tolerable name beginning with a Q," she mused smilingly one morning, when her calendar showed only thirty-three days to the

Christmas holidays, and when most of the students had decided to garb themselves wintrily in flannelette blouses and stuff skirts.

But this was even a better Tuesday than usual, for the letter-girl came bustling with her heaped tray of largesse, and laid three envelopes beside the sausage plate. . . . the oblong one with the address beginning on a level with the stamp,—mother's. . . . the grey one with its printed "Swire Mills" scored through on the flap,—from Max. . . . And the smooth creamy square one, very thick, addressed in Brian Courage's beautiful copper-plate handwriting. She slipped them into her pocket as the Lady Principal, her consort, and a row of wilted governesses filed in, and bore Miss Queed's nasal soarings into "New every morning is the love" with greater equanimity because of their nearness.

She read them during the half hour after breakfast that preceded lessons, curled up on a window ledge in the noisy recreation room where she could see a remnant of the great curtain of Virginian Creeper that flamed in unbelievable splendour over the East wing. . . . "Your father isn't well!" wrote Mrs. Quening, "a touch of gout, I think. It makes him a bit irritable at times, and his temper is rather hasty. I'll be sending you a cake in a day or two, one of your favourite sultana ones. I miss you very much, so I don't always make one. Max came up the other Sunday afternoon, and him and your father quarrelled over the Sally Law whatever that is, and your father said no one had ever defied him with impewnity and wasn't going to begin with a German. They both got rather excited but Max apologised, he has no gift of the gab compared with George, except when it comes tea-time. He uses his jaws very well then." Veronica grinned over this sly allusion; she remembered Max was an excellent trencherman despite his slim grace. She sat motionless for several moments, the happy smile playing about her lips. "Dear mother," she thought "in thirty-

three days I'll be sitting on the fender, and you'll be brushing my hair and listening to my tales of life here." She opened Max's letter. . . . "Darling," it began, "Cannot you write twice a week? From one Friday to the next seems of a length,—and then you never say that you love me, but write of those girls most uninteresting whom I shall never see. . . . Sir Shem has advanced my salary again, three pounds a week now; many marry on less than that. Do you meet young men when you go to church, or in town there? But you are promised to me Vera, you will be true, nicht wahr?" . . . She sighed and slid her finger beneath the flap of the remaining envelope. Her cheeks flushed and her eyes deepened as she read. "Your letters are very dear to me, Veronica. You never disappoint me, I go through the day on wings because the pages you have penned there in the mild south country have been propped against my toast. (It is usually striped like the zebra, and my tablecloth spotted like the pard. But Mrs. Sykes has seen better days and that seems to have a depressing effect upon the table linen.) We are in Winter here already; there was a gale on Saturday, and the solitary tree that braved the winds of many a year on the very crest of Bulkley moor was blown down. You always called him the Swashbuckler, didn't you? Well, he 'fighting fell,' smiting to the last with his sturdy arms against the advancing host of storm fiends. I longed for you to be beside me to see the unequal contest, —he was so old and the winds so lusty and young,—they had just been born out there in the North Sea and grown to swift maturity as they sped across the waste. . . . I picked up for a shilling in the dusty old box outside Dan Butt's shop the copy of Tess of the D'Urbervilles I am posting to you to-night. You will not see its battered coat when you are looking into its splendid heart, —just as I never saw the plaid frock of old days that you have scoffed at so merrily, because I was gazing deep into a pair of lovely eyes and wondering if they were

green or blue or stormy black. I know now. They are the love colour of the wise Egyptians, greeny-blue, a heavenly colour.) Heigho, Veronica! That is six years ago, and I was twenty-six. And my honest arithmetic adds twenty-six to six and bluntly makes it thirty-two,—thirty-three it will be when this old year peeps round the corner of the road. . . . Good-bye! I think I must carry away a bit of the old Swashbuckler and keep it for your Christmas log,—it will flaunt the yellow of defiance and the green of hate and the rose of love even in death I warrant." . . . Her eyes were clouded for a moment as she pushed the sheets back into the envelope,—suddenly she ached for the moor and Brian and mother, and the cosy kitchen where the firelight played over the glass-fronted bookcase where dwelt Blossom Budd, and The Lamplighter and Daisy in the Field and those annoying Ministering Children. . . . "But I do hope Max isn't going to be a nuisance," she thought as she hurried with the rest of the Junior girls to the History Lecture room.

Madam Spofforth, the Principal, was a small, alert lady with the temper of a wasp and the energy of an ant. As the girls, mostly wearing overalls of print, to avert the shininess that results from the superimposition of serge skirts upon polished wooden seats, dawdled to their places, she bustled into the room. In a trice, forty seven energetic young women were peering into the American cloth bags and hurriedly extracting Oman's green bulk therefrom. Miss Blair, the lecturer, coughed nervously, while Madam patiently waited for a cessation of rustling.

"I have here," she began, with the clear articulation upon which she prided herself, "the successful essays in my recent test. Miss Courtledge writes very pleasantly and correctly on the "Art of Scott,"— a wise choice. Miss Pusey's is also very successful, "Cranford and its author." As to the merits of Miss Quening's essay, "The Influences that moulded the work of George Sand,"—Miss Blair and I are dubious, rightly dubious, I think."

From Veronica's seat came a flashing glance that was like a challenge. Her face was flushed and her eyes very bright.

Madam Spofforth continued in her judicial tones. "Still, we are much impressed by the great ability, I might say charm,—even dangerous charm," Miss Blair nodded, —"that the work exhibits."

Veronica's clenched hands relaxed. For a moment she had feared that her contribution was to be ignored. She had poured some of her passionate soul into its vivid sentences, and swiftly, instinctively she had been on the defensive.

"As mere writing," the Principal went on, "it is far beyond all others submitted. But I must say, Miss Quening, that we deprecate your choice of subject as bold and dangerous. Had you treated a safe theme, such as 'The environment of Jane Austen' with this conspicuous ability, Miss Blair and I would not have hesitated to place your first."

"You gave us our choice, Madam!" Her heart was throbbing, and if Brian could have seen her eyes then, he would have known them velvety dark as the midnight sky.

"True; and you chose unwisely. Might I warn you, Miss Quening, should you have such a choice as we gave you,—the life of a great writer,—in your Certificate Examination, not to decide on one whose life was, I fear, unchaste in the extreme?" And she bent the severity of her gaze upon the culprit.

"Why?" asked Veronica, propping her round chin on her clasped hands. "Wouldn't the examiners know about it?"

"That is not the question!"

"Or would they consider I ought not to think they knew?" Her voice was tense. "Oh, pretence!" she exclaimed, hotly, "why can't we be natural? You give us a choice that is no choice. . . . It is not fair!"

"Miss Quening!"

"It is true. . . . I wrote what I knew I could write well. You see, Madam, I think it was her wonderful, changeful life that made Sand what she was. I think we cannot dissociate her loves and her works."

Madam Spofforth was shocked; Miss Blair unspeakably so. She blushed violently.

"A most improper attitude, Miss Quening. Decent people should draw a veil between books which I grant may be immortal, and a life that was flagrantly immoral. . . . I really scarcely know, Miss Blair," with unwonted hesitation, "if we are wise to include Miss Quening among the selected three, who," raising her voice, "are to be privileged to accept the generous invitation of Mrs. Pooll, one of our kind trustees, to spend an afternoon in Oxford."

A thrill ran round the flannelette blouses and overalls. Veronica's eyes grew more stormily dark.

"That would be most unjust," she cried. "I know my essay is the best,—no one here can write as I can. Ah, yes! I am honest! Why not? I will not pretend that I do not know. . . . If any go, in fairness I should go too." She had not yet seen Oxford, and her voice quivered at the thought of losing such a joy.

"I do not desire to be other than scrupulously fair, but,—the invitation includes more than an expedition to Oxford. The chosen three are asked with Miss Blair to luncheon at Swarthe Court. . . . May I rely on you, Miss Quening, to make no remark there in the least questionable?—You seem to have a strangely assorted knowledge for one so young."

For a moment her temper flashed up as she thought of Brian's gentle armouring. "At least it *is* knowledge, Madam,—not ignorance misnamed innocence." Then, controlling her exasperation, "But if I may go, I will not say anything that could annoy you," she added, looking so lovely in her agitation that the sour lines about the Principal's mouth relaxed slightly.

"Very well, then! Miss Quening, Miss Courtledge and

Miss Pusey will be ready, suitably and neatly attired, at twelve o'clock, when Lord Swarthe's waggonette will arrive for their conveyance to the Court."

As Madam Spofforth left the room, Miss Blair abandoned all effort to subdue the buzz of excited voices round her.

"Lunch at Swarthe Court! . . . Perhaps you will see Lord Swarthe!

"What'll you have to eat, I wonder?"

"Something different to whale cod and treacle pudding, I'll be bound," came resentfully and ungrammatically from Miss Queed.

"I'll lend you my gold watch and chain, if you like, Veronica; and I'd lend you my patent leathers if only I had the luck to wear 'threes.' But anyhow, I have a bottle of 'Jockey Club,'—you can have a shake of that," proffered unenvious Betty Roots. "That beast of a little Pusey with her white eyelashes and her prim mouth! She's a slimy little wretch! Cranford, indeed! Why, I travelled with her from Slough, and all the way she was licking her lips over a book that's positively dreadful, so I was told by a gentleman friend of mine called Fécondité," she finished confusedly, to the merriment of the others.

"It's quite true," added a tall, anæmic girl in spectacles, when the laughter subsided. "She is a pig. I saw her down the South corridor one day when old Spofforth was coming along,—and we all know what he is, girls,—she gave him such a sickening look and smile,—well, I should just think she *would* be likely to choose a moral subject! . . . But we are all glad you spoke up so, Veronica."

"Now, young ladies, please! Please pay attention! The Battle of Naseby this morning, please!" . . .

CHAPTER VII

WHAT a splendid, splendid Tuesday!

In the thinned woods past which the three girls and Miss Blair drove, the trees still clung like misers to the last of their treasure, lashing their arms in despair as the wanton wind wrenched yet another piece of gold from their nerveless grasp. Under the pale sky the slate-grey skein of the Thames unwound itself. Across it they passed, up the now familiar High Street,—placed out of bounds in the tempting bustle of Market day, when it was swayingly filled with down "ship" and their red-faced owners, small eyes beaming their jocund satisfaction at the hand of a Fate that had set them in the employer's Mecca,—probably the smallest wage-paying district in the kingdom. To-day, the quaint street was almost empty as they passed the ancient castle keep brooding over the ugly modern house that blots its park. Then they were away round the hazardous corner where the Buff Lion waits imperturbably for the accidents that so frequently befall,—and out at a swinging pace along the Oxford road, past Shillingford with its sheltered inn at the foot of a hill that had almost jerked Miss Pusey from decorum on to the fat coachman's back,—and on beyond the level fields to the great gates and the West Avenue of Swarthe Court.

"I feel frightfully nervous," whispered Amy Courtledge. "This Mrs. Pooll is a distant cousin of Lord Swarthe. She entertains for him. . . . I shan't speak a single word, I know. I may enjoy Oxford, but I shall hate the lunch. One of the Seniors told me they begin with sardines and pickles and things. Isn't it a funny idea?—and they have about five different knives

and forks. Whichever kind do you eat sardines and pickles with, do you think?"

Miss Pusey's lips curled sardonically.

"You can use your eyes and see what the others do, can't you?" she suggested scornfully. "Besides I've been to lots of Lyons's places in London. My sister is married to a large builder, a very large builder, I may say, in Beckenham. They often dine out at the 'Pop,' and have wine quite common;—even at home, my sister thinks nothing of us taking a glass of port every morning. She sends the servant for three bottles at a time quite ordinary,——"

"'Vin ordinaire,'" muttered Veronica, under her breath.

"—And if her friend, a young lady in the post office comes in with her intended for the evening, I've seen both port *and* sherry out; they have different shaped glasses for each, quite correct. She runs her house on most genteel lines."

Veronica remained unmoved.

"Don't you believe me?"

"Oh, yes!" smiled Veronica, "I can believe they have wine quite common—as you say."

"I am sure it must be lovely," conceded Miss Courtledge, oblivious of the subtle flavour of these amenities. "Well, I'll have to watch you, Laura, that's all. Oh, dear! I've forgotten my handkerchief. Whatever shall I do? I'm sure to sneeze."

"Have this!" said Veronica, gaily. "It's Rootie's Maltese lace, and she'll be scandalised if you sneeze on it, Amy. How lucky she insisted on my having it to tuck in my belt!"

"Have you been much in Town?" stuck in Miss Pusey, looking coldly at Veronica as she buttoned her brown coat.

"What town?" enquired Veronica, sweetly, eyes on a wedge-shaped flight of birds winging across the silvery-blue sky.

"Town with a capital, of course,—London," explained the other patiently.

"I have never been at all," contentedly.

"Much society of any kind where you live,—somewhere in the North, isn't it?"

"Rather Northerly."

"Quite countrified, I suppose."

"Oh, quite! . . . We don't live in a cave ourselves, but——"

A small cargo of blood was suddenly imported into Miss Pusey's long nose. "Very uncouth, I can imagine," she snapped.

Miss Courtledge intervened.

"See here, Laura,—you and I have got to behave something like," she began.

"Yes,—something like—what?" came the other's sharp-edged voice.

"Like swells, if we can," answered Amy, boldly. "We're so ugly. But Veronica,—why, you know quite well she could eat pickles out of a tablespoon, and nobody would ever see anything but that she was absolutely beautiful," she finished, warmly.

"Really! Do you think so? There is always a second opinion, I should imagine, where red hair and green eyes are in question," retorted Miss Pusey, straightening her hare fur viciously.

"Young ladies," said Miss Blair, coming suddenly out of a long abstraction, "this avenue is almost two miles long, bordered as you see with chestnuts the whole distance. The first glimpse of the mansion which we shall get directly, is considered very attractive. I believe, indeed, Lord Swarthe prefers the Court above all his residences,—though Swarthe Abbas in Warwickshire has more 'tradition.' There! We get down here."

Directly she entered the oak inner hall Veronica was reminded of her mother's tales of Boridge splendour.

Panelling ran up to the dimly-glimpsed ceiling, which was coloured a smoky blue, giving a delicate, cloudy effect above the rich tint of the oak. Beneath the distant archways, richly-moulded, could be seen the fluent grace of staircase with its sinuous curves. A log fire burnt in a recess as big as the scullery at home, and over the high mantelpiece, foils and shields were arranged round the family coat of arms picked out in scarlet and gold. Mrs. Pooll, a white-haired lady whom she had occasionally seen visiting the College, got up from a low yellow settee whose heavy black frame was carved in animals' heads, and ambled forward over the expanse of smoke-blue velvet carpet to greet Miss Blair and her young companions. She had a kind, vague smile, and wore a hat that could never have been judged dashing, and was now decidedly dashed. A long curate unwound his arm from a boss of carving on the frame of the fireplace, and straightened out beside her to be presented.

"Have we to keep our hats on, do you think?" whispered Amy, agitatedly, "Oh, dear! I do wish I hadn't been chosen."

"If Mrs. Pooll is going to have her meal in that arrangement," consoled Veronica, "I shall be glad to have your green felt to look at." And at that moment, a footman, who looked much more like a curate than the Rev. Peter Bloat, who was red-faced and horsey in appearance, announced luncheon.

As they went along a dim corridor whose heavily-curtained windows opened on a lawn swept unceasingly by gardeners in gaiters and blue aprons, an elderly man emerged from a room whence Veronica had a glimpse of books and books,—endlessly. . . .

"Swarthe!" fluttered Mrs. Pooll, "You are lunching in the Octagon Room, are you not?" Then, with a wave of her hand,—"Miss—er—Blair, from Sinodun, and some of the College girls." Her tone said too, "An uplifting

little change for the poor things," and Veronica's lips parted over her perfect teeth. The tall old man looked over his cousin's head at the radiant girl. He had a great deal of yellowish-white hair, like sunshine gilding snow, and dark blue, rather sad eyes. She judged him to be nearing seventy. He crumpled the newspaper he was carrying and tossed it down on a huge Chesterfield. "I suppose I may have it with you ladies instead," he said. "Ah! Bloat,—you too! I wanted a word or two with you." But his eyes interrogated Veronica; there was a little puzzled crease in his forehead.

Mrs. Pooll looked flurried.

"Really, Swarthe," she said. "You would be more comfortable in the Octagon. We are going to have a very brief meal as these—young ladies want to spend an hour or two in Oxford." Lord Swarthe made no answer, but passed on with the others to the room entered under an archway at the end of the corridor.

After all, luncheon was a very simple affair, eminently suitable for the young person who had happily missed boiled cod and treacle pudding. There were no "pickles and sardines" such as the well-informed Senior had described as the usual preliminary to the meals of the aristocracy. Veronica wondered if they were waiting vainly in the Octagon Room. The soup was delicious and creamy, but there was not a great deal of it. Sherry was offered by the butler, and refused in a moment of panic by Miss Courtledge. Miss Pusey sipped hers genteelly, forefinger and thumb holding the delicate stem of the glass lightly, the remaining digits spread outwards like a fan. Lord Swarthe drank sherry too, with a half-smile on his face, and sent the clerical footman to refill the red-haired young person's glass. The turbot,—describing it later Miss Pusey designated it "halibut,"—was masked in an exquisite sauce in which a more potent wine seemed hidden. And the pheasant had a border of green peas,—in November! Miss Pusey wondered how it was done. And there

was a delectable dish with mushrooms, and a lemon pudding that frothed on the painted plates like champagne.

Mr. Bloat sat beside Veronica and entertained her. With immense gusto he told her the story of the curate's egg, and several hoary mother-in-law yarns, smacking his lips over them and the plat des champignons,—"I enjoy a really good joke," he babbled, while his neighbour glanced round the room. On the low window seat many cushions, primrose and orange, were piled. It was as if all the sunshine of November were heaped there. Veronica thought the room small; she did not realise that this was the morning and not the dining room. That lay on the other side of the house, a huge apartment in gloomy mahogany and deep red brocade, seldom used. The oval table at which they were seated was pushed up towards a corner of the fireplace. There were three long windows curtained in green of a very tender Spring tint, and the whole room had a dainty, charming freshness. The carpet was like velvety moss, and the exquisite texture of the napery and the superb glitter of silver and glass delighted her. On her right Mrs. Pooll was talking in her gentle drone. "Reading is such a joy, isn't it?" Veronica pricked into attention. "I always think Florence Barvice's books so sweet for young people of both sexes."

Miss Blair assented. "But just a little sad, don't you think?—rather *too* many partings?"

Veronica's laugh bubbled out.

"I agree, Miss Blair," she said. "Why,—even her infinitives are split, are they not?"

Miss Blair turned coldly upon the interrupter, but checked her glance of disdain as she saw their host's face. Smiles overspread it; even his eyes showed only blue slits as he applauded Veronica's criticism.

"Not quite your style, I see," he said. "What is?"

But sudden shyness seized Veronica. She shook her head, but made no reply.

As they sipped their coffee in the loggia with its damp

warm atmosphere that reminded her of the fernery at home, Lord Swarthe slipped into a green and white wicker chair beside her.

"Ever seen Oxford?" he asked, lighting a cigar.

She turned eagerly towards him. "No! I'm so excited, I wish we could be off."

"Thanks!" he said, with a twinkle. "Find Bloat exhilarating at luncheon?"

"Exhilarating?"

"Witty talker, isn't he?"

She flashed a glance at his composed face. The corners of her mouth wrinkled. . . . Jove! The girl was like someone. . . .

"The course of our conversation reminded me of your beautiful avenue," she smiled.

"Thought there'd never be an end, eh?"

"Not exactly! . . . Bordered with chestnuts the whole way," she replied, demurely, rising as she saw the others grouping to depart.

Then up the vast stair, and into a virginal bedroom all white and faint mauve, with silver glittering on the dressing table and round the oval of a beautiful mirror, and in the flower-wreathed columns that held the immense wax candles. Even Miss Pusey was hushed as she skewered her hat severely above her pale hair. She had blushed scarlet on intercepting the maid's supercilious inspection of her clumsy boots desecrating the creamy Aubusson carpet.

In the hall Lord Swarthe was waiting to see the party start. The party to him was a lovely girl with a ready tongue, and gorgeous hair that shone under the curved brim of her brown beaver hat. He had not noticed the others. But in the hall, Miss Courtledge at last won attention. She emitted her only remark during the visit, and she could not doubt its effect.

"Well," she said, suddenly, pointing to a magnificent Lely let into the panelled wall. "That's just exactly like Miss Quening, isn't it?"

All stared at the picture in astonishment,—all but Lord Swarthe, who strode over to Veronica.

"What's she say your name is?" he asked in a harsh whisper, snapping his fingers round her wrist and jerking her towards him.

"Quening,—Veronica Quening," she answered, turning slightly pale.

"My God!" breathed Lord Swarthe, and dropped her hand with a violent gesture.

The others turned towards them. Not a spasm of emotion was visible on the calm and nonchalant face of Lord Swarthe.

"Well, you are really right," quavered Mrs. Pooll. "How odd! Do you see, Swarthe? Do you think Lady Anne like our young friend here?"

"Blest if there isn't a certain resemblance," admitted her cousin, very calmly. And they all trooped out to the waiting carriage, Veronica still pale as she gave a last look at the noble house and saw its splendid owner measuring her with his keen blue glance.

"I have been to Oxford," wrote Veronica in her bare cubicle that night to Brian Courage. "Oh, you had not told me how utterly glorious it is! Can hands have made anything so supremely beautiful? It does not seem possible,—so proud, so perfect,—I would rather think that nymphs and elves and fairies had wrought it. But I wish there were no slums near all that loveliness,—mean streets and miserable houses that would not rouse one's indignation so much in Beighlington,—but there! It is as if one defiled a perfect marble statue with sooty fingers! I want to go again and again,—alone,—or better still, with you, Brian. Oh, all the beauty in the world that I shall never see! Life is not long enough! Think, too, of all the books that will be yet written that you and I can never read! Perhaps another Shakespeare dawning on the world,—and we never know! Or shall we, I wonder?

But Oxford! We had two hours there, and Miss Blair and the girls chattered like idiots. . . . I don't know whether to be glad or sorry that it did not speak to them as it did to me. I think perhaps I could write if I lived there.

"But the smuts of Beighlington,—they clog my brain. Only the moor wind can always blow them off and away into the clean sky and turn them into stars. . . .

"I loved to hear of my dear old Swashbuckler dying, game to the last. And oh, a splendid death was his, battling against the wild wind! I want to run along the Crest and feel it like a hundred cold fingers in my hair. After all, I think I do not care much for the South,—it is too tame and sweet. Do you remember that bit of bare upland where you and I and Jennie lingered one Sunday, and how pearly everything was, and in the distance a turquoise mist that we pretended was the sea, though we really knew it was just the smoke rising from the Bulkley chimneys in the hollow? And how we sat on a rock and imagined it was our ship of adventure, heaped with amethysts of heather and emeralds of turf. I wonder if that is all that is in store for me, Brian,—just 'pretend' adventures. . . . I don't mind, though, so long as you are my fellow-explorer.

"I am not telling you anything about the perfect day I have had. But there was a queer incident that I must relate. We were at a magnificent place first,—Lord Swarthe's,—such pictures and china and lovely things. I recognised some old Bristol delft that I knew you would have loved. One dear bowl, with its delightful invitation, 'Drink deepe, then Sleepe!' that I coveted for you. And there were splendid brocades and tapestries, the value of which I could only guess, but the fabric superb, the colouring gorgeous. And the pictures! I know now I can't paint a bit,—do ask mother to hide that dreadful panel of roses before I get home,—I should be so deadly ashamed to face it now. Of course Mr. Appleyard's are good,—I

love them. But these were like Oxford,—it did not seem credible that hands had made them. . . . Well, Lord Swarthe was there, rather quiet, but humorous, I should say, and evidently quite sane: until we were coming away. Then one of the girls happened to say I looked like one of the portraits in the hall, and he strode up to me in such a strange way and gripped my arm, and asked me my name. Then he said something,—I'm almost sure it was 'My God!' but that seems impossible. And in a moment he was quite all right again, and nobody seemed to have noticed." She paused as if irresolute. Her eyes, remote and wistful, ranged the tiny room. Suddenly, she lifted the page she had just filled with her close writing, and crumpled it in her hand. Briefly, she brought her letter to a close. "I bless Dan Butt's shilling box,—and you! Good-bye! In thirty-two days,——"

After her task was done, she sat very still on the bed, staring at the pitch-pine wall and slowly removing the bronze hairpins that held the shining coronet of her hair, and dropping them on the mustard-coloured counterpane. Voices rang down the corridors and feet sped past her door. The girls were preparing for bed. Before ten o'clock, when the lights were extinguished, bustle and hurry and merry chatter prevailed. "Rootie," three doors away, was shouting to her neighbours Roberts and Randall (the three R's they were called), that it was freezing and she saw the first faint bloom of a chilblain on her little toe. A sympathiser proffered advice and arnica. . . . But Veronica did not hear. She was away at Swarthe Court, she was the Lady Anne sweeping over the polished floor in her pale satin gown, or pacing the dark gallery that ran above the hall where lamps blazed out of the dimness over shining statues and the deep tarnished gold of picture frames,—over her own portrait by Lely,—hers,—Veronica,—Anne,——

"What did he mean?" she mused. "Or did he mean anything? Was he just surprised to see how like we

were,—our eyes,—our hair,—the true Titian red, as I once told Max." She smiled. "How impressed he was! Dear old Max!" But the thought of Beighlington chafed her to-night. She undressed slowly, recalling the strong clasp of the old lord's hand, the magnetism and mastery of his hold. Yes! Surely he had been disturbed, startled. His glance was like the flash of a rapier, ardent, compelling. . . .

She fell asleep with his strange "My God!" and the tinkle of silver and glass and the crackling of logs in the big fireplace, and the snores of Miss Queed in Cubicle Five mingling in her ears. . . .

Next morning brought new tremors of excitement. Among Veronica's letters was one in an unknown handwriting, which some instinct forbade her to read until she was quite alone. The envelope was plain, but the sheet she drew out with trembling fingers was stiff and glazed like linen, with embossed address and crest of dripping lance, and motto,—"Ruddy and Ready."

"Dear Miss Quening," she read with fast-beating heart, "I gather that you are fond of books. I should like you to see my library,—I think it would interest you. I will write and ask Mrs. Spofforth to allow you to come to us alone one day. What do you care for most, I wonder? Fiction? Or perhaps poetry, of which I have some fine, original editions that you might care to see? Books are the grand amour of my old age, which is sometimes lonely, —and I recognised in you a true lover, I am sure. I should like to talk to you at more length." Then, quite at the end,—"Did I startle you to-day? I had been puzzling over the resemblance; strange that that little nonentity should solve the riddle! You *are* like Lady Anne, you know,—vividly, astonishingly like." And the wonderful letter was signed, grandly and simply,—"Swarthe."

CHAPTER VIII

ON a drizzling day in December, came again to Sinodun Training College, the fat coachman and the thin footman and the spanking bay horses, and—this time—the chocolate-coloured brougham of Lord Swarthe. Came, and stopped before the hall door and the window of the room where Madam Spofforth was giving agitated instructions to a girl in an uninspired serge coat and a faultily-hung serge skirt, and a dark hat whose brim could not pretend to shadow the brilliance of splendid eyes.

"An unprecedented honour!" battered the Principal's metallic tones. "Your gloves do not lack buttons, I hope. . . . No! . . . Well, then, Miss Quening, I think it advisable that the other students should not be made aware of your destination. No rumour of favouritism must be born,—indeed, as you know, I deprecate any form of partisanship in an institution. . . . Your blouse? —Cream silk?—yes, quite suitable, I am sure. You will be wise to explain your exact position to Mrs. Pooll,—she will like you none the less for being candid. . . . Lord Swarthe, it seems, gathered from something you remarked on your previous visit, that you are fond of books; he seems to imagine there may be some literary talent,—latent,—but still, possibly existing. It may be so. You write vividly. . . . People of your—er—flamboyant colouring have often tendencies towards—er—strong descriptions. . . . No jewellery, of course! . . . A brooch, yes, that is quite permissible. Well," with a frosty smile that lifted only one corner of her thin lips, "Good-bye, Miss Quening. You will doubtless have something of interest to relate on your return."

Then away they went; crunching along the drive, bowling down the gentle descent to the river, splashing through the rain-filled ruts past the wet brown fields and the trees,—all leafless now,—to the lodge gates and the great avenue and the long house delicately grey in the filmy rain, backed by the warm darkness of beech woods.

Veronica's heart was thudding as the footman opened the carriage door, and, shielding her skirt as though it were a debutante's Drawing Room finery from the muddy wheels, ushered her up the three low steps to the door which had swung open at their approach. Since September until now, she had been one of forty-seven students, alike treated as having no individuality, no idiosyncrasies, no real originality,—nothing but an exalted notion of the profession they were about to adorn;—(that they were entering upon it in most cases to earn a tolerable living was a fact most consistently ignored.) Now she became again a girl with personality and moods,—an entity, someone who mattered. She stepped under the portico with an ease that was not without dignity. This time the brown and blue-grey hall was empty, and the stately butler (at least, his gait was stately, but his face was full of a firm kindness, as if he offered no objection to the young person treading the polished floors), called a bright-faced maid who conducted her smilingly to a bedroom on the first floor. Another bedroom, this, richer, less virginal than the white and mauve apartment that had embarrassed the self-satisfied Miss Pusey so acutely. Through the windows she could see three lawns falling softly one below the other, misty-green under the gentle rain, bounded by a distant gleam of bare orchard and red brick walls. The room itself glowed in the light of a clear-burning fire. There was a huge bed, and great mirrors in the inlaid dressing table and wardrobes. She could see her face everywhere, with the plain, incongruous hat. She gripped the black glass balls that topped her hatpins, drew them out, and laid the commonplace headgear on

the berosed eiderdown that covered the bed. Through a door which the maid opened invitingly, she could see a dressing room, with big bath and gleaming marble wash-basin. She peeled off her coat; she wished it had been silk-lined, but her mother had chosen Sicilian cloth for its more reliable wearing qualities. She folded it to hide the despised lining, and laid her gloves beside it. There were delightful prints on the white walls faintly striped with rose, and the chairs had chintz covers over what Veronica guessed to be hidden grandeurs of brocade. A thick white rug swallowed a surprising fraction of her boots as she stood to warm her hands.

"I am to take you to Mrs. Pooll's sitting-room when you are ready, miss," said the rosy-faced maid, and when Veronica had washed her hands and re-coiled a long strand of hair under the girl's admiring eyes, she was ushered along a corridor so softly carpeted that her body seemed to sway sensuously as she sank into its deep luxuriance. Statues gleamed from among the lacy fronds of palms and ferns, pictures splashed the pale walls with colour, electric lamps were half-hidden everywhere,—in the clustering lilies that hung about the shoulders of an ivory tinted water-nymph, in the pomegranates held in the polished hands of a bronze Nubian girl, in the moulded cornices above every door.

Mrs. Pooll was writing at a small table near the fire. Veronica began to wonder how many fires were at that moment eating up the coal hewn in the sweat of men's striving bodies far beneath the winter fields. Surely two people did not need this diffused warmth. . . . Still, it was insidiously pleasant. . . . Her hostess came towards her with her habitual, undecided movement, as though she were hesitating whether to return instead to the fire. An insecure smile hovered about the face.

"Oh!" she said. "Miss Quening, isn't it? So glad you were able to come. The air has a slight rawness to-day, has it not?" as though she were inclined to be querulous

that her lavish fires were unable to warm a cubic inch of the outside atmosphere. "Sit down! Is that chair too low? . . . Here is a memoir of our late beloved Queen. Have you seen it? It is so entrancing, I think, to see the delightful pictures of her Majesty in childhood and to read the perfectly sweet childish things she used to say. Not like a princess at all! Almost the remarks one would expect a quite ordinary child to make,—so natural! That particularly charming story of her promise to her governess,—'I will be good!'—so simply sweet, I think. . . . You will not mind if I finish my letter? Luncheon will be ready almost immediately." And she went undecidedly back to the silver inkstand and the gold pen and the painted blotter on the kidney-shaped table, leaving Veronica smiling over the large blue tome deposited in her hands. "Her late lamented Majesty probably said 'I vill pe gut,"—which doesn't sound half so pretty," she thought roguishly.

Lord Swarthe joined his cousin and young guest at luncheon, served this time in the Octagon Room. He was nonchalant in his composure to-day. He wore a grey suit and boots superbly polished; his white hands were the hands of an artist, and his silvery-yellow hair framed his fine face nobly. She thought him a splendid lord; she had heard her mother speak of dwarfish dukes and epileptic earls,—this was how a lord should look, she thought,—strong and smiling and kind.

The library at Swarthe Court was the book-lined room she had momentarily seen before. Now she saw it in its entirety. It had a Persian carpet that seemed faded at the first glance, then absolutely perfect in its faint, tender mingling of hues. The furniture was mahogany,—the same as in the living-room at home; yet with what a difference! These chairs and tables and desks and revolving book-cases had the golden glow that the strongest tropical sun gilding the most brilliant, newly-stripped chestnut might have given. Except for three panels, and

the space of the two wide, low windows, the walls were entirely covered with books. Veronica's eyes shone, and the rose-flush deepened in her cheeks. She gazed and gazed at this treasure, standing pliant and graceful on the pinkish-browns and mauves and moonlight-blues of the carpet, hands lightly clasped before her, lips parted in wonder and bliss. The three panels held each a picture. She glanced at them, quiet, greyish studies, two of women with pale faces and haunting eyes, shadowed cheeks and sombre hair; one, of a little deserted village street. They did not hold her then; she turned again to the books;—yet, strangely, when she got back to Sinodun, of all the room's glories, those three pictures she remembered best; she did not know that the soul of Whistler had breathed on them,—that for their creation his "black palette" had held his "tenderest rose."

Swarthe watched her in silence. They were alone; he had desired to show his library to the young person who was supremely uninterested in the works of Florence Barvice. Mrs. Pooll had meandered to other fields of usefulness. She was generously paid to know when to efface herself.

"Well?" came the earl's quiet voice with its humorous tinge.

Veronica wheeled suddenly around.

"Oh!" she breathed. "There must be thousands."

"You see only half of them now," he said. "Look! Step back a little. And he touched some spring, and by a curious and surprising mechanism a book-filled panel ran forward, swung in its frame on a pivot, and slid back to show its reverse side. It was enchanting,—like the old transformation scenes at Leeds pantomime. She gave her sudden, rippling laugh.

"Now, you see, that reveals French poetry of the seventeenth century. The obverse side holds English verse of the same period. You like the arrangement?"

She shook her head laughingly. "I shall when I forget

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the shock I got," she said. "It was exactly like Aladdin's cave."

"There's a wicked uncle somewhere, isn't there? Or shall I be the genie of the lamp instead? It is getting dusk already." Carven peacocks were perched high above the book-cases. He touched a switch and their spreading tails were lit with a dozen coloured lights like jewels.

"Please don't be a genie any more," she murmured, charmed. "Do not forget I have to go out of Fairyland into the College dining-hall, and eat a slab of yellow cheese that will give me dreams enough without magic peacocks."

Then it appeared that his lordship had desired the young person's company not solely to ascertain her taste in literature. The switch clicked and the lights vanished. Red fire-glow and warm shadow filled the room; outside, the grey tints deepened.

"Come and sit here," he said, pointing to a low divan near the fire,—another, thought Veronica,—on which the downiest cushions were spread. "Tell me something about yourself,—your home,—your. . . . parents." And now his composure was a trifle less marked. "Enough of the Northern intonation lingers to tell me you are not of these parts. Am I right?"

"Yes, Lord Swarthe. My home is in Yorkshire."

"And your parents? Do they belong to Yorkshire too?"

"My father does.

"Ah! . . . And your mother?"

"My own mother is dead. . . . many years. My stepmother is a Northumbrian."

He was leaning forward, hands clasped between his knees. Suddenly he straightened himself.

"I may smoke?"

"Yes, of course."

"Thanks!"

The red glow shone on his face as he stooped again

to light his cigar. Why had she thought a moment ago that he was oddly pale?

"I am interested in you, Miss Quening. Not just an idle curiosity prompts my questions. I am interested in . . . heredity . . . I think you have ability, and I would like to help you if I can. Has your . . . father . . . similar tastes?"

A cloud came over the brightness of her face. Her companion was looking curiously at her.

"I don't know," she faltered. "Mr. Courage, my former teacher, says he is clever,—I do not know why. I never thought so myself. He says dreadful, biting things, —oh!" with a sudden vibration that shook her voice out of calmness,"—I know nothing about him really,—except that he has always hated me,—and I think him . . . horrible." Her voice sank to a whisper. A slight hissing sound came from the man at her side.

"What is his—profession?" he asked, getting up and unfolding an embossed leather screen to shelter the divan.

"I'm afraid you would not call it a profession," she said. "It's a trade,—the cleanest trade in the world, I have heard him say. It is the only thing he cares for. He grows fruit and flowers and vegetables for sale. I think he was a gardener somewhere,—I believe it was in the South of England," with a flash of recollection "but now he is in business."

"And . . . your mother? From what you have heard, is it likely that you inherit your tastes from her?"

The girl's voice softened.

"Oh, I wish I knew!" she said. "When I was small,—and bigger, too,—I used to imagine the loveliest things about her; that she was beautiful and gifted and high-born, until almost I believed it was true. But once . . . my father said that she was a—servant, and after that I could not imagine things so well somehow. I don't know why I cared; it was a foolish fancy of mine that I

48751

wanted her to be—different—from my father. If she had been living, I wouldn't have minded, so long as she loved me,—but she was dead, and I had only my fancies of her. Nothing seemed too beautiful to be true about her. . . . When I came to this house for the first time, I thought, 'Perhaps my mother once lived in a house like this.' And when I came into this room to-day, my heart began to beat with such a strange, thick feeling,—and all at once I knew there would be two windows with deep gold curtains and a low, wide window seat from which one could see the belt of beech trees at the top of those upland fields." She bent forward and clasped her hands round her knees and looked at him very earnestly. "It is ridiculous, I know, but I thought, 'Once I sat curled up there in the sunlight and read a book,—a big brown book with coloured pictures in it.' . . . Of course, I suppose I must have had a vivid dream once of some such splendid room, and it has remained tucked away in some corner to spring into memory again to-day." She checked herself. Her lips quivered suddenly.

Lord Swarthe dropped his cigar on the beaten copper of the hearth where the grey ash scattered from the dead stub.

"You are fey!" he said, abruptly.

"That is what my mother says; I was born on Midsummer Eve, you see, and the fairies whisper secrets to the babies who come then. . . . I am glad they whispered them to me," she added very softly, and looked at him with dreams in her eyes.

"Yes, I think perhaps they did," answered Lord Swarthe, slowly, and came to a pause that seemed to last a long, long time. At length he spoke.

"Come here, child!" he said. She glanced at him quickly, wondering at the change in his voice. There was something tortured in the tones. She obeyed swiftly. The old man laid his hand with heavy pressure upon her shoulder and directed her steps to the window. She felt

suddenly serious,—even a little frightened, though that, of course, was absurd. He dragged the gold curtains further back and pushed open the casement so that the chill air, laden with river mist, curled in slow swathes into the warmth of the room, wavered and gradually diffused.

"The belt of beech wood!" he muttered.

Veronica gazed at him in genuine surprise. His voice was that of a runner, spent with fatigue. . . . "Nineteen years ago, they brought my only son's body out of that belt of beech woods, Veronica, and laid it here," he went on. Deep love and despair choked his utterance. She looked at him speechlessly. She knew the dark line of woods lay up there on the crest of the slope, though the creeping dusk had already hidden it. But it seemed that Lord Swarthe could see it plainly.

"Dead!" he continued, "My only son! His horse had bolted, and a long-hanging branch had struck him on the brow,—struck life and ambition and love from him in a moment,—and hope from me. . . ." She laid her hand on his arm. Suddenly he stooped from his great height and kissed her forehead. The red ran burning up over the delicate curve of cheek and the whiteness of brow. She was trembling a little; then, on a swift impulse she too bent her head and pressed her lips against his hand. Then, "Come," said Lord Swarthe, "you will take cold, my child!" and closed the window and drew the curtains again. "Now, I am going to show you something," he added, and turned to a panel of books at the end of the room. Switching on the light, he swung the section forward. As it slid back, Veronica saw that, not more volumes, but a portrait hung on the stretched red baize behind it.

It was, as she had guessed would be the case, the portrait of a young man of about twenty-five. He had quantities of waving, bright gold hair and very bold, handsome eyes of a deep and lustrous sapphire blue. His

mouth held great sweetness and charm. There was a careless grace in his bearing,—he was depicted leaning forward on folded arms which rested on the sculptured marble of a balcony. The whole attitude was informed with restrained energy, as though he were listening, half impatiently, to the platitudes around, held yet chafed by inaction, while out there, in the far and fair beyond, intensest joy awaited his coming.

The old lord stared at Veronica, her deep green eyes fixed meditatively upon the gallant pictured face, before which the soul seemed to float and call to hers. She stood very still as though her own soul fluttered ready to respond to that something strong yet subtle, evanescent yet enduring. So she stood for some minutes until, with a whirr, the panel again slid forward, revolved, and fell back into place.

Her companion was breathing hard, and she herself was conscious of an overpowering sensation of faintness. She crossed the room and sank again to the divan. For the space of several moments a deep silence hung between them. At last their eyes encountered and his lips moved.

"Just now, I have learnt what is the greatest mistake one can make in life," he said, speaking with a great effort. She waited. "It is to have missed a love one might have had, to regret a joy foregone by one's own action," he finished, heavily.

Veronica's heart and pulse were racing. A curious hesitation weighted her usual readiness of speech. It was with a feeling of relief she heard the door open, and the sound of the servant's voice.

"Tea is waiting in the mistress's sitting-room, my lord," he said. "And Mr. Guy has just arrived."

With a palpable effort, Lord Swarthe won composure.

"My nephew," he said, turning in explanation to Veronica. "A very fine fellow,—you will like him." And in a moment the sense of deep intimacy was fled. She rose and smiled shyly at the gracious nobleman, who

with grave courtesy held the door for her to pass out. They mounted the stair together. But under the light conversation she felt still the lingering thrill from the intimate, poignant hour just ended.

Guy Stadhampton was the son of Lord Swarthe's younger brother. He was a serious-looking man of thirty, with the fine figure of a soldier,—he had fought with distinction in the Boer War, and had only recently on the death of his father resigned his commission. As Veronica entered the boudoir, she had a swift impression of a grave face, a mobile mouth, and very expressive grey eyes that looked light under strongly-marked eyebrows. A likeable face, she thought, one to give inspiration and trust as did the face of Brian Courage.

Mrs. Pooll's hands were hovering about the tea equipage in their usual uncertain manner. The girl noticed that she looked perturbed, and, instantly amused, she smiled her sweetest as she acknowledged Lord Swarthe's presentation of the newcomer. If he were surprised at this somewhat shabby apparition in the dainty boudoir, he certainly did not show it. When the footman had carried the girl's cup of tea to a small table drawn up near the settee, Stadhampton sat down beside her. "He is going to be nice to me," she thought, happily, as she stirred the pale China tea in a cup as frail as an egg-shell, and tinted in hedge-sparrow blue. "Though Mrs. Pooll has been warning him about me,—I can see that; so of course he is not married, or she wouldn't have troubled. She looked quite guilty, poor old lady, as I came in. It is lovely to feel that she thinks I am a wee bit dangerous. . . . Oh, Max! '*Are* there any young men?'—If only you could see me now."

Certainly, Guy Stadhampton could see her; and seldom, he thought, had he seen anything more fair. Her eyes were dewy with the memory of the hour in the book-scented warmth and luxury of the library, yet shot with a beam of merriment as she listened idly to Mrs. Pooll's

disconnected utterances. . . . He liked the way her hair in rich curling masses coiled about the small ears and wide, candid brow; wished that fashion did not decree that the column of her round throat must be hidden; admired the short upper lip and the curve of the mouth, sensuous yet sensitive to every play of humour. Once or twice he glanced across at his uncle with a fleeting touch of uneasiness; he noticed that he looked very tired and worn, yet in some odd way uplifted, subtly older than he had thought two months ago on his previous visit, yet bearing an exalted alertness that was strangely youthful.

"How are your mother and sisters, Guy?" asked Lord Swarthe.

"Mother's ailments keep her very happy, and Barbara as well as Ida, who is with us just now, very busy," answered his nephew, laughing. "The latest idea is to go to bed with bags of hot salt round her head to induce sleep. They are always getting disarranged and being found next morning in the vicinity of her feet, and this morning she awoke with a raging thirst, and her maid discovered that one of the bags had burst, so I left her wondering how much salt she had swallowed during the night. I said it was a good thing she had not fixed on sand, which was the alternative prescription. And poor Barbara got into trouble for suggesting that grit was just what the mater lacked."

Mrs. Pooll looked waveringly sympathetic. "Your dear mother is a great sufferer, Guy," she said. "I, too, am a martyr to insomnia, and the owls here make the most distressing noises at night. I think I shall try the salt bags,—it sounds quite new."

Guy laughed. "Mother is like you," he said, "and often complains that the owls have been hooting all night long. And that reminds me of Tubby, Ida's little boy. He is the most engaging kiddie. I went in to see him at nursery breakfast the other day; he was looking fearfully dismal. 'What's up, Tubby, old boy?' I said. He stared solemnly

at me. 'I never slept at all,' he answereo, 'the oots have been howling drefly all night.' "

Mrs. Pooll appeared pained; the others laughed heartily. "I always think it is so important not to encourage children in exaggeration," she protested, feebly.

Guy glanced at her with a genuine affection. He thought her oddities were like glass beads that some misguided person might have used to embroider a piece of material of beautiful texture,—irritating, but not of sufficient consequence to obscure the background of true worth.

"You remember Ida's husband's cousin, Valentine Chamier?" he remarked, handing Veronica a plate of dainty iced cakes, and glancing at his uncle. "He was at a shoot at their place in Scotland once when you were present."

Lord Swarthe nodded.

"I met him in town last week," Guy continued. "He said he had just completed a royal week and was off up North somewhere to settle down to hard work at his uncle's place,—he is a millowner or colliery proprietor or something of that sort, appallingly wealthy. He cut Chamier off a few years ago after one of his escapades, but his plucky behaviour at Spion Kop made the old chap overlook his most glaring indiscretions and offer him another chance. Chamier was in Hartmann's buying a stack of books on Mining Engineering and the Wool Trade and so on, to swot up on the journey. Said he didn't want to appear too ignorant about his new job, but was hanged if he could remember what line the old chap was in, but he felt sure it wasn't the wine trade."

The earl smiled, but he appeared strained and ill-at-ease; and Guy noticed that he seldom withdrew his gaze from the young girl beside whom he sat; until at a word from Mrs. Pooll, she rose, and, with a charming and deferential grace bade them good-bye and went to prepare for her drive back to College.

When the door closed on Veronica, the old man sighed heavily; he seemed to have forgotten Guy's presence, and after a moment or two's pacing up and down among the tables, passed quietly from the room.

Guy looked after him concernedly. "By Jove!" he muttered. "I never contemplated the old chap breaking up; he has always been so young and fit, but to-day he looks different somehow,——" his light eyes narrowed anxiously, "—I hope the old boy isn't feeling ill. He's been a jolly fine father to me,—I wonder if anything's worrying him. . . . What a lovely creature the little schoolgirl is!—a type familiar to me too, though how—" And he, too, sauntered off to dress.

CHAPTER IX

IN the library a book bound in dull old calf stood wedged upon an upper shelf between "L'hermite de Londres" and the Memoirs of De Retz. It was a chronicle of the House of Swarthe, being, as was stated in old English characters beneath the title, a correct and discursive record of the legitimate descendants of Philip Stadhampton, First Earl Swarthe.

After dinner on the night of Veronica's second visit, Lord Swarthe, excusing himself on the plea of fatigue from a match of billiards with his young kinsman, withdrew to the solitude of his favourite room and took down the book. He studied it long, head bent on one slender hand as the other rapidly turned the leaves with a rhythmic flutter. When an hour had thus passed, he rose, and reversing the apparatus that screened the portrait of his dead son, drew a chair forward and so sat, very pale and quiet, looking thoughtfully at the beloved face.

"It is not yet too late, Harry," he whispered, brokenly, "I will atone."

In the great escritoire were stores of white paper; in the massive gold tray a score of pens. Ink welled darkly in the heavy cut-glass bottles of the ebony and gold inkstand. Lord Swarthe collected the material he required, sat down and wrote briefly and rapidly. Then he rang the bell. Slidd, the footman, arrived, and solemnly awaited orders.

"I want Mr. Bunt, Slidd, please. And you may return with him."

"Yes, my lord!"

The door closed noiselessly; the red fire spurted and

flamed anew as the logs fell apart; behind the panel, the face of Harry, the dead heir, smiled.

Lord Swarthe sat immobile until the butler and footman returned.

"Please witness my signature, Bunt."

"Certainly, my lord."

"Now sign,—there!"

The butler squared his shoulders, looked at the pen, sighed, detached an imaginary hair, tried the gold nib on a spatulate thumb nail, and complied. The footman followed suit.

"Thanks! That will do nicely. You write a good hand, Slidd."

"Board School, my lord. Civil Service 'and we was taught," and Slidd faded away, the effaced shadow of a curate behind the bishop-like stateliness of Bunt.

"Until to-morrow!" murmured Lord Swarthe, and with a lingering smile he slipped the paper into a fold of the Chronicle of his house and rose to replace it in its accustomed niche.

Reseating himself in the big revolving chair at the writing table, he was conscious of a pleasant feeling of lassitude. The room was warm; the shaded electric lamp was burning with a soft glow beside him, the potent scent of books was soothing. Dinner had been satisfactory, the '57 port was still perfect. "It will last my time," he muttered, and smiled. Decent of Guy to come down so often,—never made a fellow feel his shoes were wanted . . . good chap, Guy. . . . In no hurry . . . a few years more,—with the girl,—the russet-haired girl to sit beside him,—and read to him . . . The yellow-white head drooped; a delicious langour was creeping about him. . . .

"And I have written the letter to my lawyers to explain. . . ." He sat upright and lifted the pen. And it was just then that the first pain struck him, a wrench-

ing, tearing claw of pain that left him with dewed forehead and shaken lips. "Gad! That's the salmis," he thought, and leaned forward to touch the bell. . . . His man, Trout, was away,—Bunt must come and help him to bed. . . . He fumbled for the ivory knob;—it was not there. He stared. The bell had vanished. Why, —incredible lapse of memory,—there it was on the other side of the big fireplace; . . . miles . . . and miles. . . . His brain groped for the context, brow knit perplexedly, found it triumphantly,—

> "Where the quiet-coloured end of evening smiles
> Miles—and miles—"

Why had he wanted to ring the bell? . . . Ah, the pain! It was gone now. No need for Bunt. . . . Bunt,—or was it Browning again? Browning and "a girl with eager eyes and yellow hair." Old Browning knew! Gold even in the grey of quiet-coloured eve, "What's become of all the gold?" . . . It's there, on the divan,—wealth of gold heaped round the face of a girl. . . . Again memory clicked a reminder. The girl! . . . There was a letter,—it must be written . . . and now he had forgotten what it was he had to write about. . . . Harry knew,—but Harry's face was hidden. There was a great red gash on his brow, though his lips were smiling. . . . *she* had kissed him with Harry's lips. . . . The minutes passed. He dozed; roused; shook his shoulders impatiently, and drew a sheet of paper towards him, and stared at it frowningly. . . . The lawyer's name? . . . Crafty old fox he was, too. . . . No, no! That was his name,—very decent chap,—funny side whiskers he wore!

"My dear Craft," he wrote.

"I think it is necessary for you to know." . . . The pen wavered, stopped; then went on again. His con-

scious mind had lost all definition, all clarity,—only on his subconscious mind trivial memories obtruded. He began to inscribe with painful deliberation the square-toed looking letters that formed the name of William Bunt, shaping each blunt curve and dotting each "i" with intensity. . . . That was very good. Now,—Herbert Slidd! What was the style? . . . Civil Service,—yes, Slidd always gave that,—a good running hand. "Beastly name, Herbert!" said Lord Swarthe aloud, and tore the sheet again and again with childish irritation.

And all at once, the agony recommenced,—ridging his brow and knotting his hands and locking his jaws. "Help me, Veron——" he gasped,—and remembered! . . . He must get the paper! It might never be found! . . . "This is Death," he whispered between those fixed lips. The walls were slipping away. He had forgotten the bell now. The walls,—the old Chronicle,—the paper,—the paper!

"God!" came from his wrung lips. Now he had forgotten on which wall the book was stationed. . . . His eyes became glassy in the sweating terror that this thought gave. Was he not to atone? . . . Then the walls advanced towards him again; his brow cleared and he gave a sob of relief, and smiled. Smiled, twisting that writhing mouth into a fatuous grin of satisfaction. He began to edge towards the books. . . . Cunning devils! They were slipping away again. He dropped to his knees, now, and crept on, stalking them. They had such scent,—no! that was the deer! But he kept his position and crawled forward, the sweat dripping from his ghastly face. "Miles and miles" . . . the deer forest . . . he had not remembered he was in Scotland. . . . Ah, no!—he was in hell! Some damned idiot of a gun had shot him . . . he was dying, alone, on the mountain side. He pitched forward and lay prone along the floor, his hands relaxing and his contorted face hidden in the blues and greens and silver-greys of the carpet. . . .

Midnight had boomed from the big grandfather in the hall, tinkled from the silver timepiece in the drawing room, chimed resonantly from the bronze clock in the billiard room, when Guy Stadhampton came along the corridor to the library door, turned the handle, entered, and switched on the light over the section of books devoted to modern fiction. That fellow, Chamier, had been telling him of a new novel,—amusing talker, Chamier. Guy glanced half-idly along the shelves, then noticed that the lamp on his uncle's writing-table beside the fire had not been extinguished. He crossed the room . . . and saw the body of Lord Swarthe lying in the shadow of the great leather screen. Instantly, he had sent the insistent message of the bell pealing through the house. Mr. Bunt, sitting in an unbuttoned-looking attitude over the Sporting Pink in the steward's room, heard it and set down his glass of port; heard the first footman going on unaccustomed hurrying feet in response to its summons; waited, and in another minute saw Slidd's scared face appear in the aperture of the door.

"You're wanted, Mr. Bunt, in the libery. His lordship's been took ill,—bad job Mr. Trout's away. I'm just off to tell Dora to acquaint Mrs. Pooll." And the face disappeared.

The butler jumped heavily to his feet and ran with clumsy haste along the passage, through the green baize door, and on to the library.

"My uncle, Bunt," cried Guy, raising a white face. "No, no! Not dead, I hope and believe."

Bunt looked down with pallid face. "His lordship must have had a Cæsar!" he said, solemnly. "The others are coming, Mr. Guy. We will get him upstairs comfor'bly in a few minutes." And, kneeling down, he gently turned the helpless form and began deftly to remove his master's collar, while Guy looked on pitifully.

"Telephone for the doctor, sir, while we get his lordship to his room," advised the butler. And in a moment

the house was full of hushed energy and soft voices that scarcely stirred the brooding silence that midnight had wrapped about it.

Then the doctor came and took the gravity of his professional face into the vast bedroom where the helpless bulk was lying in the great carved bed.

Below, in the forsaken library, Mr. Bunt, bridging for the nonce the gulf that separated him from his junior, conversed as man to man with Slidd.

" 'E gets everything, I reckon, if 'is lordship pegs out?" said the footman with an upward jerk of thumb.

"Everythink!" repeated Mr. Bunt. "With the sole exception of charities and Mrs. Pooll and Miss Ida as was, and Miss Barbary, a small in memorial of a thousand or two, I dessay."

"I sh'd think the staff of over a year's service would be likely to be remembered," put in Slidd, anxiously.

"His lordship's been a good master,—mebbe so!"

"Jer think we ought to tell Mr. Guy about the paper wot we apprehended our signachewers to this evening?" suggested the footman.

Mr. Bunt considered, gazing at the fire, whose embers still glowed feebly. It was then that he saw the scattered scraps of paper lying on the carpet; some had fallen on the hearth and one or two charred shreds clung to the edge of the grate.

"Why, these is it!" he exclaimed, and stooped, wheezing, to retrieve "Wil" from the floor. "And here's the 'lid' out of your name too. His lordship must have tore that there paper up."

"After congratterlating me on my penmanship as well," said the other, aggrieved, reaching for a widely-spaced "Herb."

"I'll keep these and show them to Mr. Guy," remarked the butler importantly, discovering "Craft" in the Earl's handwriting, and adding it to the pile.

"Wot beats me is where's his lordship's signachewer," Slidd rejoined.

"That's burnt, that is!" answered his companion with finality. "And that fact renders these 'ere bits of paper invalids as far as the lor goes. . . . Now turn the lights out and get to bed."

In the room where the stricken man lay, the hours dragged heavily. Near the window, yet where he could see the doctor's calm face and note any change in the strange mask from which so recently the soul of Dundas, Earl of Swarthe had looked, sat the heir, Guy Stadhampton. Shielded as he was by the heavy curtains, the softly-shaded lights left his face dim. To and from the next room hovered Mrs. Pooll, surprisingly wrinkled and old in a red dressing gown edged with dingy fur. Once Guy moved and set some cushions in a chair, urging her to rest, but she shook her head, and he resumed his thoughtful watch. He had been happy in idle anticipation of his heritage,—he wished realisation were not thus stupendously imminent. A vague child's memory of the splendid youth who should have inherited the wealth and grandeur that would soon be his own invaded his meditations. . . . Suddenly, towards dawn, the doctor, marking a subtle change in the contorted face lying on the white pillow, raised his hand with an abrupt gesture. "He is regaining consciousness," he said in the clear, low tones that were yet not a whisper. And Guy, responding instantly, drew near, and with intent gravity studied the unfamiliar countenance. A slow alteration was faintly evident. The heavy, wrinkled eyelids fluttered almost imperceptibly, so that a thin line of cloudy blue was momentarily seen. The purple of the lips changed to a magenta hue; the painful breath came more readily from that strange mouth drawn at a sharp angle towards the cheek. Though the right arm remained heavily inert, the fingers

of the left moved vaguely, with growing restlessness. All at once the blue eyes opened widely, and broken utterances came from the pitiful mouth. Guy bent forward, striving to win something intelligible from those garbled sounds. A look of intense, baffled fury gleamed in the sunken eyes, and now a terrible torrent of meaningless syllables poured from the twisted lips. Guy, with a glance of intense pity, turned to the doctor, who shook his head slightly. As if he had seen the gesture, the old man glared at them with hatred.

"Oh, don't do that, Dundy!" pleaded Mrs. Pooll, using the abbreviation of sixty years ago. "We'll try to understand," she promised, weak tears raining down her withered cheeks. "He wants to tell us something," turning helplessly to the doctor. "Can't he write it?"

Doctor Grey looked anxious. "Better wait a bit," he ventured, soothingly, "his right arm is not very strong, yet . . . Paralysed," his lips formed, noiselessly.

Guy saw an even more horrible expression of malignant rage fill the patient's eyes; they seemed the only living things in that dead face.

"Oh dear! Oh, dear!" moaned Mrs. Pooll. "He does so want to tell us something. Let him try to write it with his left hand."

The futile anger died from those blue eyes. A film of mist clouded them again. Guy seconded the old lady's suggestion eagerly, and as the doctor nodded, brought a writing pad and pencil, and, holding the former firmly, steadily placed the latter in the flaccid hand. Swarthe began to jab powerlessly at the paper. Guy lowered it a little, and with passionate concentration he strove to imbue that wondering mind with his own force. The prodding ceased. Deliberate marks began to appear on the sheet. Guy closed his eyes and schooled his every thought to telepathy. Now the lines seemed stronger. The three watchers waited intently. Minutes passed; then the soft sound of the lead on the smooth paper ceased. A satisfied

gleam crossed the patient's face. Guy looked at the tablet. . . . On it was sketched the outline of a house such as a child of four might have drawn,—a shaky square with five windows barred each way, and a crinkly line of curtain edging them; a pointed roof from whose inebriated chimney a curl of smoke issued; an uncertain door with a huge black knob in its upper centre; three steps ascending from a wobbly path. . . . And as he looked sadly and impotently at the absurd drawing, a terrible cry of despair broke from the old man, the cry of some animal, trapped, dying, while it gazed on the free world about it. Then Mrs. Pooll, clutching the furred edges of her gown in her trembling hands, leaned above that awful face; looked deep into those hopeless eyes, and straightened herself suddenly. The love that she had borne him since childhood had served her well.

"He wants that girl,—that girl from the College," she said, with gentle and absolute certainty.

And both knew it was as she said; the thwarted fury had, at her unerring intuition, vanished from the Earl's face, and a glow of peace shone in his eyes for a moment, then the burdened lids drooped. The doctor turned questioningly to the others.

"I will go at once and bring her back," said Guy, quietly.

The wintry dawn broke as he waited for the motor,—his own little car in which he had arrived the previous evening; it seemed very long ago to him now. Lord Swarthe had none, despising the insidious mechanism that threatened to dispossess the horses of England. When it ran up to the doorway he went swiftly down the steps, and, dismissing his chauffeur, was presently gliding down the avenue between black, dripping trees in the chill of the December morning. In the East a tarnished silvery lustre broke the sullenness of a sombre sky. Guy shivered; his face looked pale after the night's vigil, and the strain

of the distressing episode just ended. But the calm light grey of his eyes showed no fatigue, and his hand on the steering wheel was steady as a rock.

Eight o'clock struck from the tower of St. Aidan's as he slipped over the bridge of Sinodun; and as he drew to a standstill at the College entrance, a soft babel of voices smote on his ear from the ivied wing behind him, where the girls were assembled in the dim dining-hall for breakfast. The odour of hot coffee reached him, an odd fragrance, for tea and coffee were drawn on alternate mornings from the same urn, so that one always had a strangely clinging perfume and taste of the other. Suddenly, a thrill ran up the line of his jaw; he realised that he was very hungry.

He gave the print-clad maid an urgent message. She vanished, leaving him unceremoniously in the hall, among brushes and cleaning mops. Almost directly, Mr. Spofforth came out to him, napkin in hand. As he came forward, he swept it furtively across his ragged moustache.

"My name is Stadhampton," began Guy. "I am sorry to disturb you, but my uncle, Lord Swarthe, is seriously, —dangerously ill." He hesitated a little, feeling that his errand must seem a peculiar one.

His hearer's questioning look changed to a sycophantic smile. . . . Hateful beast, thought Guy, glancing with antipathy at the lounging figure suddenly straightened in weak deference. His tie was awry, and a couple of buttons of his waistcoat unfastened. He had leering eyes and baggy cheeks. His feet were shuffling in too-roomy slippers.

"I shall be happy, most happy, Mr. Stadhampton, to assist you to any extent within my power." There was something voracious in his eagerness.

"Thanks, indeed. . . . No, I will not sit, thank you. . . . One of your students, a young lady named Quening, visited Mrs. Pooll at the Court yesterday. I—I shall be glad if you will allow her to return to-day. I—

my cousin, Mrs. Pooll, is in great distress,—she has apparently taken a fancy to the young lady,—and begs that you will permit her to go back with me now, if the request is not too preposterous."

Mr. Spofforth's leer changed suddenly to an expression of complete understanding. His eyelid faintly drooped, and he stuck his thumbs into the pockets of his disordered waistcoat and assumed the air of a man about town. "To oblige his lordship," he said, meaningly, "we must try to arrange it, Mr. Stadhampton."

Guy felt furious, but controlled himself.

"May she come now?" he asked, patiently.

Mr. Spofforth flapped away to convey the odd request to his wife, of whom he stood in some awe.

The minutes passed. Then the dining-room door opened again, and the small, erect figure of Madam Spofforth came into view, Veronica's graceful form beside her. The girl wore a navy-blue skirt and a dark green blouse; her face was fresh as a summer rose, lovelier even than he had thought it yesterday. There was a shocked look in the brilliant eyes, and her mouth was grave as she hurried towards him and laid her slim hand in his, as if they were old friends. Mrs. Spofforth, perturbed by this familiarity, remodelled her expression as she saw her visitor's face light up. Then he turned to her and recommenced his explanations.

"Go and get ready at once," said the Principal, briefly. "And wrap up warmly." Veronica sped away. "Now, Mr. Stadhampton, you must have some coffee and a sandwich; come into my room."

Guy followed her gratefully and ate and drank with relish. By the time he had set down his empty cup, Veronica had returned, muffled in a fleecy coat.

"Good-bye," said Mrs. Spofforth. "Do all you can for Mrs. Pooll; there is no need to hasten back."

"I will see that she returns safely," Guy assured her, shaking hands cordially.

As they ran out of the town along the level road, he began to speak softly; to tell his companion something of the sudden trouble that had befallen Swarthe Court, and to prepare her for the effect of the seizure that had so incredibly changed the handsome features of the old lord.

Veronica turned misty eyes to his.

"I liked him so much," she said simply. "He was so kind to me yesterday. But,—I cannot think you are right in thinking he wants to see me. He took only a casual interest in me, of course. I would not presume to think otherwise,—he, a great nobleman,—I, just a girl of the working classes. Why," a swift smile chasing the shadow from her face. "I never used a fish-knife and fork until I came to the Court,—I have never been in a motor car until now."

"Do you like it?" he asked eagerly.

"I would love it if my heart did not ache," she answered. "But I am very sad to think I made a friend and then could have him only one day."

"He may recover!" quickly.

"But you don't think so!"

"No, I don't," he admitted, sadly. "But you must let me be your friend too, Miss Quening."

"How kind you are," she said gratefully. "All of you,—kinder than anyone I have known, I think. I suppose it is because you are rich, and have leisure. All the people in Beighlington are so busy making money that it takes most of them years and years to make friends."

"But the Yorkshire people are very staunch, aren't they? Being friends once, they are friends for ever,—so I shall expect you to be very faithful when you do accept me as a friend,—even if it takes you years to decide whether you will or not."

She flushed rosily.

"Oh, I didn't mean that!" she exclaimed. "I loved Lord Swarthe at once, and I like you very much already."

"I am glad," he answered with a smile that belied the gravity of his eyes. "I shall not let you forget that you said that. . . . Now, here we are! Let me help you out!"

The second footman opened the door. He was young, and not yet trained to utter vacuity of expression. He shook his head soberly as Guy turned towards him. "No improvement, sir," he said, feelingly.

Then Mrs. Pooll came forward with reddened lids and blurred eyes; she bent and kissed Veronica's cold smooth cheek. The slight constraint there had lain between them passed for ever in that embrace. Tears rushed to the girl's eyes; the remoteness and isolation that age must spell, came to her with a swift pang. She put out her hands impulsively, and laid them about the shoulders of the elder woman. For a moment there was a silence between them in which much was said. Then Mrs. Pooll led her away to remove her wraps.

"Wait at his door until I bring her, Guy," she whispered.

Veronica's heart quickened its beat. The cloud that hovered over the spacious house oppressed her; a choking sensation caught her throat. In the boudoir a silver tray stood, bearing a filter of coffee and tiny gilt-handled cups. Dora, Mrs. Pooll's maid, removed the girl's hat and coat, and poured the coffee, hot and black, into one of the cups.

"Drink it," said Mrs. Pooll, and she obeyed. "Now, come!"

Along the corridors they went, past the bronze and marble statues, past the graceful outlines of richly-toned Chippendale furniture, delightfully-moulded tables and cabinets aglow with the bizarre splendour of Chinese pottery or rich with the heaped froth of Indian ivories, past the cushioned window seats, the palm-filled corners, the heavily-draped windows, to a door where Guy stood quietly awaiting their appearance.

The doctor met them as they entered. A white-capped

nurse floated softly past, and, at a signal from the doctor, vanished.

Veronica, with a quick intake of breath, saw the hideously-changed face in the shadow of the great bed. The gaiety of youth died out in her wide eyes. She paled, and there was a strange and sharp pang at her heart. But she went steadily forward. She laid her little hand on his twitching left one, and saw the wistful longing in his sunken eyes. The swift colour poured into her cheeks; she stooped, and with infinite sweetness and gentleness kissed his furrowed brow and misshapen mouth. Guy, watching her, thought her adorable, exquisite in her young slimness and beauty. He stepped up to her and took her hand.

"I want you to understand, uncle Dundas," he said, speaking very slowly and clearly. "You wished to befriend Veronica, I know. I earnestly assure you that I will look after her, and if she ever needs a friend, she will find one in me,—always."

An expression of ineffable content passed over the old man's face. He half-raised his hand as if in blessing, shivered slightly; the wry mouth straightened, smiled. Very loudly and distinctly, he called the name of his dead son, —"Harry, Harry!" Then as they watched, the light fled from the eyes, the hand clenched, relaxed; a long tremor passed over the big frame; the doctor slipped an arm beneath the broad shoulders, then very gently removed it. Dundas, Earl of Swarthe was no more. "The wind of Death's imperishable wing" shuddered through the room. . . . The sound of broken sobbing came from where the meagre form of Mrs. Pooll crouched by the great bed. . . .

A few days later, Veronica completed her first term at Sinodun, and went, sobered, but not unhappy, to her Northern home.

CHAPTER X

EIGHTEEN months had passed. Over the Thames Valley a June of surprising beauty had dawned. Beside the river the alders dipped; great curving branches of elm leaned to the reflection of their new and silken green in the sliding, glittering water.

Thick on the long avenue of Swarthe Court lay the tinted wings and delicate antennæ of the fallen chestnut blossom. Sunshine filled its garden squares, its green smooth lawns, its flower-mosaiced park. The air, flecked with butterflies and murmurous with bees, was caressingly drowsy without being sultry. Geraniums flaming beside the regally-tinted bells of fuchsia; the pinkish-azure heads of hydrangea nodded to the incense of heliotrope and grey mignonette. Fading mauve of wistaria draped the arches and pergolas. A myriad buds of roses lit their carmine jets of flame; about the stone terrace the amorous arms of honeysuckle clung. The spread wings of iris mirrored the deep blue of the summer sky. Indigo shadows of distant cedars splashed the emerald sheen of close-shorn grass. By the fringe of the brook, pollarded willows flung aloft their fountains of new and supple growth. The birds forgot their poignant Springtime call in the fulfilment of Summer's mating. The nightingale alone knew no solace to its yearning; deep hidden among the painted beeches and scented limes, it sent its palpitating song of wild desire beating through the silver nights.

Veronica had come to say farewell to Mrs. Pooll and Swarthe Court. Each term since the old Earl's death, she had spent a long day with her kindly friend, who still made her home in the beautiful grey house. Mrs. Stad-

hampton had declined to leave her house near Maidenhead; her eldest daughter was married in the neighbourhood; and she and her younger girl, Barbara, had travelled much with Guy since his accession to the title. After her brother-in-law's death, they had wintered in California; last Autumn they had spent in Rome where they had secured a charming apartment, and where, moving in her exquisite slender fairness among the dark, vivacious Italians, Barbara had been tremendously admired; an admiration repeated as they wandered under Algeria's deep blue skies. Mrs. Stadhampton had almost forgotten what an English winter was like. She grew ten years younger, was no longer hypochondriac. Money-bags she had found to be a more effective panacea than the salt-bags of other days. Dundas's funny old cousin was quite welcome to stay at Swarthe until Guy brought home a wife, which of course he must do someday. Meantime, this year the gloomy old town house had been opened, and colour and light had flooded its shadowed rooms and dark staircases, and music and laughter had rung through its corridors.

In all her visits, Veronica had seen the new lord but once; yet that once had shown that she was not forgotten; had ratified the friendship begun in the big silent room whose long windows she could see now as she sat waiting for him in the walled garden to which the three lawns fell. In the warm stillness the gold bills of the blackbirds were busy mong the Morella cherries ripening slowly on the red North wall. She wore a frock of green linen; it was open at the neck and showed the fine modelling of her pure throat. Round her waist was a belt formed of lined medallions of silver, in each of which a plaque of deep blue and green enamel was set. It had been Lord Swarthe's gift to her, sent, on his return from Algiers, with a short note thanking her for the visits she had paid to Mrs. Pooll,—visits limited in number since she could not expect preferential treatment among the students,

but the brightness of which had given great joy to her old acquaintance, lately in indifferent health.

To-day, on reaching the Court, she had learnt that Lord Swarthe was in London,—had sent a message saying that he wished to see Miss Quening before she left College in July, and that he intended to motor down from Town for that purpose. After luncheon, Mrs. Pooll had retired to her room to rest, and Veronica, informing her devoted admirer, Slidd, that she would be found in the walled garden when his lordship arrived, and that he might bring tea to her there, had wandered out with a book, which now lay beside her with discarded hat of burnt straw. She had been writing, but had slipped the paper and small, silver pencil between the leaves of Swinburne's poems, and now sat very still in the shade of an arbour over which a great mass of syringa rioted. She felt as if she were wrapped in its perfumed cloak, its embrace was almost stifling, yet she sat on, lulled by the soft hum of bees and the fugitive, drowsy note of sleepy birds. Her life in College was almost over. Next month she was going back to Beighlington, examinations behind her. She was to be assistant mistress in a new school that had been built since her departure. The careless, deeply-occupied days were nearly ended, the freer, more strenuous ones yet to begin. Youth brimmed full in her,—the sparkling wine of youth. She had made acquaintances,—friends. Like straws on a stream they had floated together, some interlocked, others blown apart for a while by a wanton puff of wind. One or two had slipped among the weeds at the edge, and sailed no more in the midstream throng. Lord Swarthe had joined her for a moment, touched, then suddenly been borne to the brink. Others had companied with her,—Amy Courtledge, a fragile stem that the current had bent and the wind had tossed ashore. . . . Amy was dead; she slept under the daisied robe of grass in the cemetery on the Oxford Road. More soberly the straws had drifted, skimmed along,

clustering closer for the one that had been snatched from their midst. And then, a few months ago, another straw had broken away,—somewhere it lay, blackened, stamped upon, ground into the slimy mud. Of that befouled one she thought with a shudder; not again would Miss Pusey lower pale lashes over her vicious eyes, or smile with her prim mouth about the corridors of Sinodun College. The waters of midstream bore onwards those who had been her fellows—somewhere in the ooze she lay, debased. . . . Away below was the Bridge, the many-arched Bridge under which some would swim out to the distant sea; some, swept widely apart, would float contentedly enough into the shallows and there remain, inert.

So Veronica sat and mused; but in her day-dream she clove her way boldly through the centre arch, her course unbarred by reed or drooping willow,—out and away she swam to the wide freedom of the unknown, the boundless sea.

So, dreams in her eyes, Guy saw her as he hastened towards the green recess; she sat with clasped hands, lights and shadows of emotion playing over her mobile face. She glanced up and saw him coming down the grassy steps towards her. In his hands he held a knot of carnations, their tones sliding from lemon colour to deepest flame. An eager light filled his grey eyes; she thought him sunburnt, older-looking, more serious than she had remembered him; it was over a year since they had met. She rose hastily and went to greet him, holding out her hands. He laid the flowers in them, their musk scent rushed upwards. Then he drew her again into the arbour beneath the canopy of syringa. His voice was not quite steady when he spoke.

"Veronica! It is good to see you again."

"You have been long in coming."

"The roads lead to Rome; yet the roads run from it too."

"Ah, you have seen splendours since last we met!"

"I did not care for them; only to please my mother and sister we remained away;—and,—because my plans had to wait until now, when you are free."

She studied him, surprised. "I?—Yes, I am almost free now."

"Are you sorry, Veronica?"

"No! I want to go on,—something else! I have done so little yet, and such a big slice of my life gone already,—twenty years! There is so much I want to see. Oh, I have envied you,—Rome,—Venice,—Morocco,—'golden Byzantium'!"

He looked searchingly at her expressive face. His voice sounded tired after the fresh young vigour of hers.

"I did not care for them," he said again.

"Ah!" she breathed, on a note of longing.

"If you feel so deeply about places you have not seen,—'embellish Rome, idealize away,'—I fear you will sometimes be disappointed when you view them in reality."

"You think it will come, then?"

"Yes, I imagine most things will come to you, Veronica."

"I shall not be disappointed."

"But there is dross everywhere; if the alchemy of your youth and innocence turns it all to gold,—some day you will be grievously hurt."

How old he seemed to her then! His voice was grave and weary, his eyes unlit by gleam of humour. Her splendid youth rose buoyant in her throat.

"I shall not be disappointed," she repeated, and the challenge of her voice rang like the dropping of a mailed glove between them.

A little silence fell. A faint breeze had sprung up; it tossed lightly the plumes of browning lilac; blue shadows spread softly from the grey house, dimming the brilliance of parterres. A thrush came and shook its liquid notes from an adjacent pear tree.

"Oh!" said Guy. "There is nothing like England,—nothing."

"I know; but this is too—honeyed," she answered. "I am wanting the moor now,—the freedom, the space,—the silence. They are superb." She stretched out her arms as though she answered, too, the call that stirred her heart.

"How you can feel!" he said, half-enviously.

She replied on a rebellious note. "You think I have no restraint . . . it is true, I suppose."

"No, no, dear! I am envying you,—envying you."

"I want things so," she went on. "Yet sometimes I think I should never be satisfied to be long away from the moor,—from Yorkshire,—though another bit of me wants to range the world."

"This contents me. I have no Wanderlust."

"Ah, but did it content you when you were twenty?"

He looked at her, startled.

"Do I seem old to you, dear?"

"Not old," she smiled. "But not exactly young."

"I am thirty-two."

"Brian Courage is older than that," she said, musingly. "Yet he is the youngest person I know."

"Who is he, Veronica?"

"My old schoolmaster."

"Are you only his pupil?"

Purposely, she misread his words. "Not I only," she laughed. "He has lots more."

"Of course! . . . You do not care for him, except as a pupil might care for her tutor?"

She shook her head.

"I haven't thought about how I care for him," she said gently. "I couldn't do without his friendship,—I cannot conceive what it would be like without him."

He did not pursue the subject. Idly, he lifted the book of poems she had brought from the house; the silver pencil held the leaves slightly apart. They fell open and he saw a sheet of paper covered with Veronica's delicate, small writing. Here and there was a neat alteration.

"May I?" he asked.

She flushed. "Oh, it is nothing but scribble,—not worth your reading. But of course you may."

He read slowly:—

"O, gentle and suave is the line of the downs
That circles the Southern vale,
Where pearly and fair dream the snug little towns
That never knew tempest and gale;
O, caressing the breeze that was woodland-born
And drowsy with scent of pine,
O, slumbrous the poppies a-glow in the corn,
And clinging the tendrils of vine!

"O, rugged and sombre the shoulder of moor
Humped, stark against Northern sky,
Defiant the laughter, triumphant the roar
Of the torrent, thundering by!
O, stinging and swift is the kiss of the storm,
And ice-cold its clasp from the sea,—
But I cling to them, numb lips and shuddering form,
For their touch breaks a spell,—and I'm free!"

"You wrote that?" Guy asked.

She nodded half deprecatingly.

"Oh, it is worthless," she said. "I write and write, but of course it is no good."

"I like it," he answered. "You care deeply for your home?"

"If by my home you mean something more than four walls,—yes!"

"It would disappoint you not to return to it?"

"Yes . . . but I could bear it. What I could not bear would be my mother's disappointment. She is living for next month."

"But,—she is not your own mother?"

"She has been a perfect mother to me," Veronica said tenderly.

"Still, she has your father."

"No! He does not need her. It is because I have needed her so much that she loves and needs me."

"You have spoken to her of me,—of the interest my uncle took in you?" Guy questioned.

"No."

He seeemd surprised at her brief answer.

"I wanted to keep—this—for myself. . . . And when Lord Swarthe died, I did not want to share his—well, it was sort of confidence—with anyone."

"My uncle took a great liking to you, Veronica."

"Yes, I think he did."

"I am sure of it. . . . I think he would be pleased if you accepted the offer I am going to make to you now, dear."

His voice held nervousness. Veronica did not speak.

"I want you not to go back to Yorkshire,—I want you to stay here, Veronica, with Mrs. Pooll."

"To stay here?" she echoed.

"For a while. . . . A year perhaps . . . until——" He broke off sharply, then went on more quietly. "You have grown to be dear to me, Veronica. I thought much of you when I was away. I often wished that you had been with me,—Florence,—you would have loved Florence, —and Algiers and Sicily,—perhaps Sicily the best of all. Stay a year," his voice was suddenly pleading. "I want you to like us all,—to meet my mother, my sisters,—to come into our lives; you would scatter sunshine in them as you have done in Mrs. Pooll's. She has told me how you have written to her each week,—she has been much touched by your sweet thought. Hers is rather a drab existence since my uncle died. . . . My people will grow to care for you as I have done,—you are beautiful, young, you have great charm, you are so adaptable,—in a year, Veronica,——" He did not finish the sentence.

She answered the suggestion rather than the words.

"In a year," she said, speaking gently, "after a year of this—velvetiness,—silken cushions,—mossy carpets,—exquisite food,—perhaps I might not *want* to go back home,—to sit on the living-room fender (it is a

steel fender with three broad, flat bars, and it rests on a hearthrug that my mother made from scraps of cloth saved up for years), and read while mother sits and knits or sews,—not silk ties such as your sisters might make, not a piece of Honiton Point like Mrs. Pooll's needlework, but worsted stockings and coarse shirts." Her eyes, green-blue as the wall of a sliding wave, were suddenly filled with tears.

Guy laid his hand on hers. The carnations he had brought to her burnt on the faint hue of her linen dress.

"But, dear, why should you want to do that? It is not your setting,—you deserve something better,—you admit that you desire the sweets of life. I am offering them to you,—gladly, eagerly,——"

"Oh!" she said, passionately, lifting her hand and brushing it across her eyes, "don't you see I am longing to take all—all you offer me? . . . But I can't!"

"Why, dear?"

"Don't you see that, however little I might want to go back, my mother would be wanting my return all the more,—in a year,—in two years,—longing, working, living,—all for the day when she would see me again? Listen! Once she told me the reason she married my father. He is a strange, hot-tempered man. She did not love him; but she loved children. She had had none by her first marriage,—knew she would never have any. She was comfortably off; she had no one but herself to think of; she came into what she knew would be a hard life,—a difficult life; toiled, strove, saved,—for what? For me!—a motherless little child. Oh! she has wrapped me about with her love, it glorifies her, shines in her eyes, trembles in her every word; though she is not educated or clever or gifted except for that one divine gift,—she knows how to love!"

Guy was silent, moved. Veronica continued more quietly.

"That is my mother,—how could I leave her for,—for-

give me,—strangers? . . . I have a friend; she loves me too. She is modest, simple, good. Too simple to understand faithlessness! She believes in me, believes that I shall always be her friend, because she is utterly loyal and could not conceive anything so base as disloyalty. She would forgive to the uttermost,—forget all wrongs but forgetfulness. If I were in the direst disgrace, her hand would be held out to me in pity and understanding,—in sympathy and perfect understanding. I have another friend; his greatest desire is for my advancement; he has forgotten ambition for himself to see its star shining for me. But he would rather the star were dimmed for ever than I should win to it through casting aside those who have made my life what it has been, care-free, happy, smooth,—the opposite of everything it would have been without these who have loved me."

"But you need not cast them aside, Veronica."

Her eyes were full of a sweet wisdom as she pondered his words. Her voice was very tender when she spoke again.

"You know that is not true, Guy. In time I might perhaps as you say, adapt myself to your ways, take all you offered, greedily, gladly. Music, gaiety, travel; have my fill of dancing and theatre-going and pleasures that I want and should enjoy,—oh, enjoy to the limit of enjoyment! . . . But could my mother sit in Mrs. Pooll's drawing-room and talk to her guests,—compare the value of the waters of Vichy and the waters of Harrogate,—argue as to the merits of two Harley Street specialists in their treatment of imaginary neurotic ailments,—give an opinion as to the superior advantage of shopping in Paris or Vienna? . . . Could Jennie dance in the ball-room of your London house,—Mrs. Pooll has told me something of its splendours,—and understand the veiled compliments of her aristocratic partners?—we are used to broader effect in Beighlington, you know. Or sit in a box at the Opera and dissect the soul of Wagner,—

Jennie, who revels in the Salvation Army Band that bangs and blares at the corner of Caven Street on Sunday morning?. . . Only Mr. Courage of all my friends could fit into your mosaic; it is perfect, but the colours are too faint, too rare, the pieces too minutely, too delicately cut to tolerate such crude colours, such rough contours, in their pattern."

Guy was silent, held by the thrilling voice, no less than by the glowing beauty of the girl beside him. While they had talked, the shadows had lengthened. The western sky turned green, then took on a faint and delicious glow of peace. Above this tenderly-tinted bar a thin young moon, its silver arc only barely visible in the exquisite lavender-blue sky, was slipping slowly down. The air seemed suddenly softer, more clinging. Tiny gnats strung themselves in its caress, dancing up and down as though they wove in it some intricate lacy design. Guy watched them idly. After a few moments he spoke.

"Veronica,—dear little Veronica! Have you understood me, do you think? I had not meant to speak yet,—I meant to wait until you had grown dear to us all; but I want to make my meaning quite clear. I am asking you,—some day,—to be my wife."

She turned her eyes, her lovely, luminous eyes, from that flushed sky to the man's face.

"Yes," she answered with extreme gentleness. "I think I understood. . . . I like you so much,—so very much. . . . I am so happy that you like me too,——"

"Love, Veronica!"

She shook her head slightly. Swift tears blurred her eyes.

"No," she said, and her voice was like the air, soft, silken, caressing. "No! . . . But I think you *have* loved, deeply, once. I have always thought so,—and wondered about it. Lord Swarthe said I was 'fey.' Perhaps I am. And this is my birthday eve. . . . Could you speak to me

about that,—Guy?" The carnations fell to her feet, little pools of fire on the grey stone. She laid her small hand, light and fair as the drooping syringa blossom, on his arm. He shivered slightly.

"That was long ago,—it has been long, long over," he answered hoarsely. "I am offering you love, Veronica."

"Not what once you counted love, Guy, when *you* were twenty. You cannot offer that to me, can you?" Her voice was tinged with sadness, a vague regret. Something impelled him to answer her with absolute truth.

"No,—not that, dear!"

"But that is what I need,—must have," she said, softly.

"Yes,—I see!—That is what you must have. . . . The best is not good enough for you, Veronica. You will give greatly; you have the right to demand greatly too."

Her mouth was wistful. Gathering tears dimmed the brightness of her eyes.

"I *am* fey this evening," she said, looking towards the spot where the tiny brook widened into a lake. "I have hurt you, and yet,—and yet,—I have a strange, sure feeling that not only are you going to be very happy here, but that a great and wonderful joy will come into my life too, in this place. . . . Oh, Guy, I hope indeed you will be happy."

"Not unless you make me so, Veronica. Forget that I have loved before,—only remember that I can again." Ardour,—almost passion, threaded his voice. Almost, not quite!

Veronica sighed softly. It was as though a petal floated down through the waves of air.

"She is married to another man,—dead to me. . . . I have not seen her for years."

"Yet you will again."

"I do not think so."

"Yes," she murmured. "Straws,—we are all straws floating,—you and she,—all of us! . . . She was swept away from you,—an islet, a clump of reeds, perhaps

only a tiny twig,—parted you; you were separated, but something tells me you will meet again. . . . I—I know it, somehow. Wait for the best, Guy, won't you?"

He was deeply moved.

"There!" she said, laughing. "We have been very serious. Let us be friends still, Guy!"

"Always!"

"Listen!" She lifted her head. "The bells of Oxford, —old Tom Tower's hundred notes,——" Very faint and sweet the chimes floated out, like silver threads tossed, upflung, swaying, fluttering, withdrawn, on the still air.

"Good-bye," said Veronica. "Good-bye, Oxford,—the Court,—Guy,—no, only 'Au revoir' to those, I hope! Good-bye, a real good-bye to my teens that to-morrow will be gone for ever!"

He took a leather case from his pocket.

"Here is some jade I got you in Rome," he said, putting it into her hands. She smiled her thanks. "And now,— 'Au revoir,'—dear, dearest Veronica! . . . I had thought, hoped, that here we might kiss,—will you kiss me, Veronica?" His face was tense.

Without replying, she leaned towards him. His bent arm closed round her, he felt her sweet nearness, the fragrance of her hair, subtle, delicious, as if it were wreathed with jasmine. In the green gloom, scent and song wrapping them about, they kissed.

BOOK TWO

THE BRIDGE

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BOOK II

THE BRIDGE

CHAPTER I

CLEAN about the streets of Beighlinton, shrewishly-scolding at its task, swept the March wind, disdainfully flinging aloft the frowsy odours inseparable from a woollen manufacturing town. Indigo clouds raced across a cold steel sky, in which the silver sword points of stars nakedly shivered. In the West, black mill chimneys split the fading glow of an orange sunset which had flamed almost preposterous in its barbaric splendour of colouring.

Veronica Quening, lifting her face out of the white furs that framed it,—thirty-nine-and-six so recently at Dernier's that they still were really white,—and feeling the cold brush of the wind's caress on cheeks and lips, slipped out of the sheath of assistant school-mistress, and instead knew herself Bacchante. The taste of the ocean drifted on the scudding gusts.

"Chill from grey wold's lean land, and spiced by forest green land,
Wind-borne past miles of clean land, comes the sea's kiss, fresh and salt."

The words fell into place in her mind; it did not seem as though she had brought them into existence; rather that they had floated through the iced air, and, ordered and marshalled, slid into the warm recesses of her memory. Her face glowed as she looked beyond the ugly heaps of houses and factories to the massed banners of the

Western sky. She was happy, and, for the nonce, contented. Her work, though occassionally irksome, was far from disagreeable. Her fellow-teachers were tolerant of her new ideals,—so ancient they knew them,—and sympathetic in her successes and failures, pardoning the youth that babbled of a noble career while they spoke of a half-clad living. The twenty months that had elapsed since her going down from College had been almost uniformly pleasant. Her father, if more levelly morose than before, was less prone to eruptions of violence. Sweetly unruffled, radiating serenity, her stepmother ordered the little house. Max Linders remained her slave, Jennie more tightly wound about her the arms of adoration, Brian Courage trained and tended and pruned as of yore. To her surprise, she discovered on her return home, that a measure of friendship had been meted by dour George Quening to the young schoolmaster. They spent long hours in discussion together whilst the nurseryman syringed the starry primulas and shaded cinerarias and trumpet-shaped, velvet petunias in the low warm greenhouses, or thinned grapes in the upper vinery. Veronica, coming suddenly one day upon the two, unaware, realised the absence of dialect from the older man's phraseology; she had before suspected that its assumption was chiefly insistent for her supposed annoyance. What brought more astonishment was the interest depicted upon both faces; she was conscious of the prevalent catchword "Eugenics" before she slipped quietly away. . . .

Now, as she ran up the broad steps of the Technical Institute, she cast aside the puzzle that congeniality between the strangely-assorted pair had presented to her, and clutched in the warm silkiness of her muff the green-bound copy of "Jedbury Junior."

"I hope I am word-perfect in my part," she thought, as she hurried down the darkened hall to the dimly-lit stage where the members of the Dramatic Club were waiting in lounging boredom,—the men endeavouring to as-

sume Tree-like postures against the shabby wings, and the women Vanbrughian sinuosity about the sparse properties.

Gilbert Hammond, the President of the Dales Amateur Dramatic Society,—familiarly known as the "DADS," —relieved a dilapidated canvas hawthorn of his weight as he saw Veronica's black velvet Tam o' Shanter, russet hair, tinted face and snowy furs appear above the level of the platform. He bent a severe gaze upon the delinquent; he had suspected sarcasm in the leading lady since her flippant contribution to the important discussion on the christening of the Society, newly-formed in the preceding October. "You hatched it, Gilbert," she had said, with smiling helpfulness. "Let us call it the 'Hammond Egg' Society. It will give people quite an appetite for our vagaries." The President had never felt his position really secure since the gust of laughter that had applauded this absurd remark. He was a tall young man with narrow shoulders and wet-straw coloured hair that waved unpardonably above a pair of large, empty eyes. A dust of dandruff, like fine oatmeal, lying on his black coat collar rendered approach of the fastidious painful. He wore, in addition to the usual habiliments, a sable edging to his finger nails, a handkerchief odious with frangipani, and a look of worried preoccupation.

"You're five minutes late, Miss Quening."

"Sorry, the wind was blowing behind you, not me."

Max Linders crossed the stage towards her. "You might have allowed me to call for you, Vera," he murmured reproachfully.

"That was not the way the wind blew at all, Max," she answered, calmly, flicking the dust from a tree stump and sitting down on it, throwing a smile to the other ladies present.

"I may accompany you on the way home, I hope?" whispered Max, bending over the velvet Tam o' Shanter.

"Jennie's going to call for me," answered Veronica, over an indifferent shoulder.

The dark blood flushed the skin of the young German. He clenched his hand, but made no reply.

"Well, listen here!" began the President, leaning over the back of a degenerate chair. "Before we begin rehearsal, I have a piece of bad news; Mr. Horice Binns, our leading gentleman, who we assigned to the part of Christopher in the cast,"—his trick of inserting the Cockney "r" in this and similar words stippled Mr. Hammond's speech with half-admired eccentricity,—"has received an appointment at Oldham and has reluctantly tendered his resignation. Now, if we're going to give this show next month as is jue for the Hospital funds, we must appoint a successor. I would offer myself, but, as stage manager, *and* hon. treasurer *and* hon. secretary, I feel that already my post is no sign-cure."

"It certainly doesn't stop his creaking," whispered Veronica, wickedly, to an uncomprehending young female, who, on her initiation, had delightfully entertained the leading lady by negativing the President's query as to whether she had been accustomed to take "ingynews," with the admission,—"Only anti-pyrin sometimes."

"Now," went on Mr. Hammond,"—any suggestions, ladies and gentlemen, to extricate us from our dilemmer?"

"I see Mr. Harry Bates isn't here to-night," said Veroncia, swinging a carefully-shod foot. "But I suggest that the part be offered to him."

Mr. Hammond looked bleakly towards the flies.

"We mustn't forget that Mr. Bates's occupation, being a moulder, hardly fits him for the portrayal of a culchered if impecunious gentleman. Of course, I admit he's very good at character parts,—a very useful man indeed,—he's cast for Whymper and does it very well,——"

Veronica looked at him scornfully. "I admire Mr. Bates; and I like the way he speaks."

"Oh, yes! But his accent is very—er—blunt, at times; perhaps that is on account of him being out in Africa.

He was just an ordinary Trooper in the Boer War, I believe," loftily.

"Was he really?" questioned Veronica, gravely. "So much nicer than being just an ordinary Drooper, wasn't it?"

The sad pallor of the President's large eyes upbraided her mimicry. He had no sense of humour, but the satisfying assurance of superiority which is pendent to that lack. He stroked the sleek curtain of his hair. His gesture held the reproof and command that might have been Canute's as he rebuked the oncoming waves. "Any further suggestions?" he enquired patiently. "What about you, Linders?"

"I would be pleased in any capacity wherein you deemed me worthy, to assist," answered Max, eagerly.

"Oh, we can't do without you in the orchestra, Max," put in Veronica, hastily, instantly visualising the too-amorous proximity of her admirer at rehearsal and performance. "Half the people come only to hear your solos during the entr'actes."

At that moment, a little man strutted forward from the obscure shadow cast by the end of a thatched cottage that boasted length and breadth but no thickness except in the umbrageous foliage that overhung it. His name was Bird, and Veronica had often thought he could not have been more suitably labelled, since his duty it was to pick up among the "DADS" unconsidered crumbs of rôles,—dukes, footmen, mob, soldiers off,—according to the exigencies of the moment. In a high-pitched voice he spoke, ostentatiously adjusting a pince-nez that had reddened the bridge of his nose and depressed the corners of his short-sighted eyes.

"I've got an idear that might be some good, Mr. President. As you know, I'm in the office at Joshua Freeman's. I've just had a move into the Chief's office,—carrying a pecuniary increase, I am glad to say,"—he

added, with a smirk towards the "ingynew," Miss Miller. His gaze, returning, intercepted Veronica's yawn. An access of venom tinged his voice as he proceeded. "The Chief's nephew spends a good bit of his time there; he's learning us three clerks to play at Bridge,—says we are coming along like the Millennium, whatever that is. We have some rare old times when Stevenson, the Head, is in the Chief's private room." Mr. Bird was enjoying his usurpation of a prominent twig. "He's a very affable fellow, is this Mr. Chamier,—sees when a chap is a bit above the ordinary,—reads a lot, too. Some remark I made to-day, 'Ah, Bird, I see you know your "Decameron"!' 'Well, as to that, sir,' says I, 'I don't much care for these here Scotch authors,—Crockett, and this here Barrie folks is so gone on.' He laughed fit to split; he likes a chap to have his opinions cut and dried, does Mr. Chamier."

Mr. Hammond looked dubious.

"I don't think that book you refer to *is* a Scotch book," he put in. "I've heard about it,—it's by an Italian, I believe,—what's his name now?—begins with a B,—Bot—something——"

Veronica's eyes narrowed. She gave Mr. Hammond a sidelong glance.

"Why, Gilbert, you are a walking encyclopædia. . . . Botticelli, was it not?" she suggested, roguishly. The President looked relieved.

"That's it," he agreed. "Thanks! A lapsus memoray on my part."

"Doesn't sound like a Dago name,—I thought the D stood for David, likely, and I'm sure Cameron is Scotch enough," said the perturbed Mr. Bird. "Anyhow, I only mentioned that to show Mr. Chamier's friendliness,—nothing uppish about him, though I heard he'd been at Oxford College. I was telling him about our Society, and our efforts for Charity, and he evinced the greatest interest. 'Ah!' says he, in his hearty manner, 'The play's

the thing. Where do you hang out for practice?' So I told him, and gave him a corjle invite to pop in and see us at it, and he said in his witty way, he'd likely blow in to-night some time. Now," impressively, "it just occurred to my mind as our respected President was speaking, w'y not ask Mr. Chamier to try the vacant part? Him being a gentleman born and bred would be a right asset to our ranks if he condescended to accept."

For the first and last time in her life Veronica was interested in Charlie Bird. A new face, new ideas clothed in new language,—or rather, the language that had been everyday currency at Swarthe Court! Swarthe Court and Guy! How far away they seemed! He, indeed, was farther. That morning had brought to her a letter written by him at Roquebrune. It had told her of orange and lemon orchard, of olive groves and woods of pine and cypress,—of heath breaking into pearl-white bloom, the thousand shades and delicious fragrance of the flowers that covered the grey-green slopes,—mimosa, bougainvillea, stocks, roses, anemones, violets, and tall tulips that lifted their brimming wine-cups to the sun,—names that seemed impossible dreams under a slaty Yorkshire sky, while around spread black earth barely broken by earliest tufts of yellow crocuses. The letter had stirred her longings, roused for a moment those desires never quite stilled. She thought of it now, while the chatter went on around her,—of the faint reproach that ran through it,—if she had been beside him to climb to the quaint villages caught like strips of fretted grey lace about the rocky heights; to explore the wooded clefts that ran to the blue Mediterranean, delicately-foam-capped as it swirled upon the yellow sands of the little bays! Then, at the end, another note was struck. "You remember," he wrote, "—or at any rate, I do,—your words to me in the arbour at Swarthe. Well, so far, they are true. I have seen her again. We met one day at Eze. Her husband is at the tables every day,—a brute of a man. He was in

the Indian Cavalry, but has thrown that up, I hear. He looks ill, in a bloated, unpleasant way. She and I talked; but I shall never understand why she married him. To none but you, little friend, would I tell so much as this; I have promised to bid her good-bye before I return to England. . . ." Mr. Hammond's voice broke upon her meditations.

"Well, let's run through the curtain-raiser first! Here, Bird, you read Bates's part; it looks as if he isn't coming to-night."

Veronica slipped off her fur tie and coat. She was wearing a frock of deep sapphire blue velveteen, fitting closely to the exquisite curves of her figure. At the neck and sleeves were pleated frills of ivory net. The loose knot of her burnished hair gleamed beneath the dark hat, and her white neck had the sheen of perfect health. Her hands, too, were white and smooth and she used them charmingly in her not too-frequent gestures. The one-act play rehearsed was slight, but had something human and appealing about it that had given it a success. Max Linders was a picturesque young artist, and Veronica his artless and bored wife. Charlie Bird, with sundry settling of pince-nez and clearing of voice completed, essayed to read the part of the critical and moneyed friend. The lines were unfamiliar to him; there were several stumbles over untoward words. "Incompatibility" was a pitfall. Having climbed from it painfully, dignity ruffled, he went haltingly on.

"'How immense is this golf that separates husbands and wives," he read, in his superior and tinny accents. The music of Veronica's laugh rippled out.

At that moment, Valentine Chamier came upon the group unnoticed. He paused in the wings, and looked his first upon Veronica Quening. She was standing where the indifferent gaslight fell on the soft lights and warm shadows of her mock-velvet dress, one hand outstretched and arrested in the exquisite gesture that Mr. Bird's

blunder had checked. Her laughing eyes were on his surprised and offended ones. Vitality and youth were aglow in her,—rich on the curve of her cheek, the upraised, rounded chin, the pure line of throat, the outstretched, buoyant hand.

"Good God! . . . In Beighlington the blighted!" muttered the new-comer, dropping his cigarette and setting a shapely boot on its fiery tip.

Then the tableau broke.

"'Gulf,' man, not 'golf,'" came Hammond's irritable correction.

"Oh, couldn't we leave it 'golf' instead!" laughed Veronica. "I think Mr. Bird's interpretation perfectly delicious."

The little clerk preened himself. "I thought the idear was rather witty, what?" he asked, winking at Miss Miller, and twisting his sandy moustache.

"Oh, we must keep to the book!" objected the President. "If we are going to start gags, we shan't know where to draw the line."

"That'd draw the *house*, I'll betcher," retaliated the crestfallen wit.

Valentine Chamier lounged forward.

"Hope my butting in does not appear an intrusion?" he said, glancing round with an air of careless friendliness.

Charlie Bird flopped forward.

"Mr. Chamier, sir, let me introjuice you to our President, Mr. Hammond."

"Pleased to meet you, sir," beamed Gilbert, bowing in what he thought the Ainley, and Veronica the ungainly manner. "Our littel lot just rehearsing Jessop's trifle, 'The Top Score,' Allow me! The Script!" retrieving a pamphlet from Miss Miller and presenting it with empressment.

"Ah, thanks! . . . Do not let me interrupt!"

"Not at all, I assure you. We had paused to consider

a suggestion of Miss Quening's,—Miss Veronica Quening, —Mr. Chamier!—but I don't hold with monkeying about with what's in print."

"Good! True to your 'type,' eh?"

"However, pleased to discuss any hints you like to put forward, sir. We endeavour to keep as up-to-date as possible, though of course we are Amaters,"—the "DADS" had seven distinct ways of pronouncing this trying word,—"so if you see any discrepancies in our performance as compared with London style, we shall be honoured if you will mention the fact. . . . Now, ladies and gents, from 'Incompatibility,' please!"

The rehearsal,—two of the performers more self-conscious than before,—went on. An accession of German gutturals, only noticeable when he was perturbed, became apparent in Max's speech. Mr. Bird fluttered and fumbled like a startled hen over his reading; lost his place so frequently, that, had he been a cook, thought Veronica, he would have had no character left; sailed out upon first syllables with the courage born of despair, only inevitably to be wrecked upon the last. Such words! . . . "Resuscitation"! What a mouthful to be applied to a drowning person! He and Veronica compromised at last on "resustication," which she laughingly admitted sounded more probable. Perhaps the other was a misprint! Mr. Chamier, sitting upon Veronica's abandoned tree stump, carefully nursing her coat and furs, seemed vastly entertained, especially applauding Mr. Bird's rendering, which he frequently encouraged as "Jolly original, by Jove!"

"No swank about him, what?" questioned the heated and elated clerk waiting his cue in the near neighbourhood of Miss Miller.

Miss Miller looked with an acute eye that she strove to make vague upon the newcomer. She was employed in a dry-cleaning establishment in Silver Street, and

seemed pleasantly agitated over the delicate biscuit colour of Mr. Chamier's light overcoat. "It 'ud show every spot! And look at him, holding all Miss Quening's things! Do you think, Charlie, you should offer to hang them up somewhere?"

Veronica adroitly dodging an embrace that the ardour of Max's approach threatened to make too realistic, spoke her last lines, omitting the "tag," the enunciation of which Mr. Hammond had learnt from the second cousin of a third-rate actor portended disaster to any production, and slipped into a corner beside Miss Hetty Lund, who played character parts in a regrettably uncharacteristic style. A deputation drew near to Mr. Chamier's tree stump. She saw his smile of amused surprise as they pronounced their proposal. He looked well-bred, she thought, and he was undeniably handsome. He and Max, —two uncommonly good-looking men, well-proportioned, extremely graceful,—yet how dissimilar! Valentine Chamier was very tall and excessively fair. His hair was almost corn-coloured, it had a silvery look where the light struck it. He had a small, fair moustache and strange, slow-moving blue eyes. He was pale, but evidently healthy, even virile. Veronica searched for the word that seeemd to describe him,—found it.—Patrician? Yes, though if he were the nephew of that hard-fisted old miser, Joshua Freeman, his blood was probably not so purely blue as were his eyes. Yet he had that indescribable air of being of the nobility,—Guy owned it in a lesser degree,—old Lord Swarthe had possessed it in a greater,—that air of breeding, careless yet fine,—the stamp of the Oxford man of leisure and wealth and culture. How coarse Gilbert Hammond was, with his affectations and unspeakable hands,—how absurd the consequential ignorance of Charlie Bird! For a moment a feeling of disgust rose in the girl! This was the environment in which her lot was cast!—She, who might have

revelled in the luxury of Swarthe Court, have basked in the charm of Guy's presence, known the exquisite delights of far wanderings,—she had cast all aside! Why? . . . Suddenly, the fear that she had erred buffeted her . . . Then she looked up and met the unmistakable challenge of Valentine Chamier's blue eyes. Into her own crept wonder and joy and anticipation. Quite suddenly, she felt that, owning freedom, she possessed all. The world lay before her, its gifts outspread. She had but to stretch forth her hand,—unfettered,——

His words reached her; he spoke with a soft drawl, occasionally clipping a final "g." The male "DADS" severally determined on like cuts,—a decision that later played havoc with Veronica's gravity.

"I don't mind havin' a shot at the thing," Chamier capitulated. "Though I fear my dramatic genius will prove a shy bird."

Mr. Hammond breathed a sigh of relief.

"That's settled, then, thank Goodness! I'm sure we acknowledge a deep debt to you, Chamier, and to Mr. Bird for prevailing upon you to interest yourself in our little Society. And I can only remark that we feel your presence will give a cachou to the whole affair." Mr. Chamier bent a sudden scrutiny upon his boot. "Now," went on the President, "we shan't be able to go through the book to-night,—you would like to read Christopher first and tackle him next Chewsday, I daresay. So we'll just take your song, Miss Quening, and finish up. We've done a good evening's work and no mistake!"

Veronica went down the stage steps,—the same that she had proudly descended, prize-laden, on the bitter-sweet night when she had danced, and the life of little Jubilee Phyllis had so cruelly snapped. A sudden memory sent her soberly to the piano, which Max had opened; a stab of recollection lent unusual beauty and perception to her rendering of the desolate opening lines of Tosti's "Good-bye;"

"Falling leaf and fading tree,
Lines of white on a sullen sea."

Passion and an aching sense of pain threaded the sweet, untrained voice. The words rang, laden with renunciation, through the big, empty hall; the waves of sound flowed over the abruptly-hushed stage. Valentine Chamier gripped his burden of furs and coats,—soft, sweet-smelling, deliciously feminine things, and leaned forward, blue eyes searching the gloom where Veronica sat and Linders bent above her. Suddenly, the girl's head drooped; with a little cry of heartbreak she threw her arms across the folded lid of the instrument; dropped her lovely head upon them in a pose of stricken abandon. Almost he seemed to hear the slow tears drip. . . . He spring to his feet, nonchalance gone. . . . Another moment and Veronica was mounting the steps, her laughing face turned to Linders. Valentine's heart had missed a beat. He almost stammered as he asked,

"Why did you not finish it? Did you feel ill?"

Veronica looked at him shyly.

"Oh, no!" she explained, smiling. "I break down there. Luckily,—for I could never manage that difficult third verse."

He wrenched composure from agitation.

"You have a beautiful voice, Miss Quening." But more than his surprise at the fresh, pure tones, was the astonishing revelation that such power of acting gave. Really, she had deceived him,—him,—whom the pathos and heroics of some of the greatest stage artists of the day had left unmoved. This slip of a girl,—among the worse than mediocre players with whom she was surrounded! Amazing!

"I really know very little about music," she was saying, carelessly, "though I love it dearly. It has taken Mr. Linders weeks to achieve this moderate result."

"You are right, Mr. Chamier," interposed Max. "Vera

has a lovely natural voice." He used the small name of familiarity almost defiantly, pronouncing it in the foreign fashion with a faint "y" sound. This man looked dangerous,—no time to lose in warning him off. "The pity is that she will not agree to its being trained."

Valentine turned to him.

"You are musical, Mr. Linders, I can see."

"Yes, I love music," answered Max. But he looked at Veronica.

The ready colour dyed the girl's cheek as she sensed the possessive quality in the young German's voice and caught the stranger's quizzical, mocking glance. She put her arms into the sleeves of the long coat he held towards her, drew the white furs about the creamy curve of her throat. For an instant she felt intolerable anger against Max; then she saw the pain lurking in dark eyes, —after all, his only fault was that he cared for her. As she turned away, the cruelty of love smote her; lover and beloved,—one or both must suffer. Among the lemon groves, Guy wandered, shadowed by his unforgotten passion; here, beside her, Max tortured himself, grasped the thorns that pierced him; the calm and tranquillity of Jennie's brown eyes were like a pall of smoke about a burning house,—beneath leapt flames of desire. Veronica had long guessed that her friend dreamed secret dreams of the love of Max; yet she too clung to the spiky thorns, pressing them deeper as she urged his claims on Veronica. And suddenly, the ugliness as well as the cruelty of life beat upon her; the woman whom Guy loved, mated to a brute; Madam Spofforth with her hard face that masked one but guessed what of hidden pain, Laura Pusey, the whiteness of her youth blackened and polluted; the betrayed child driven from the moor-man long years ago,—where was she now? her father, strange and secret forces warring within him, self-doomed to hatred and mistrust. So the panorama unwound itself before her; and hers was such a tiny corner of the world,

—and everywhere struggle and pain and cruelty,—deep in the dungeons of mines,—high in the blue of air,—remote in the welter of sea,—in forest and on ice-floe, in field and pool and woodland,—unceasing, grim, remorseless, and futile. She shuddered slightly. Max was lifting the sheets of music from the rack of the piano; the others were robing for the night air, the girls pulling woollen gloves over hands still red with chilblains, the men solicitously wrapping mufflers about their throats. Veronica turned and met Valentine Chamier's clouded blue eyes; patient eyes they seemed, sleepy but inscrutable, their expression and colour unvarying; yet shallow they were not,—deep indeed, with a strange, veiled lustre remote from dullness. They formed his most striking feature, they, and the line of eyebrow upward sweeping towards the temples, many shades deeper than the silvered corn-colour of hair. Markedly expresive, those lifted eyebrows seemed to question her swift-fallen gravity. She gave him the sudden sweetness of her smile and their interrogation relaxed.

"Jolly good old world, though, all the same, isn't it?" came startlingly in his level easy tones. He turned aside on the words, pulling out a gold cigarette case and handing it about. At that moment a sound from the distant door reached Veronica. It was the light foot-fall of Jennie, stayed on its homeward progress to give her company from rehearsal. Relief seeemd to emanate from her; the steady brown eyes calmed Veronica; the familiar voice broke the odd tension to which she was unaccountably strung.

"Are you finished yet? My! But it *is* blowy along the street." Jennie's smooth hair was ruffled, cheeks reddened by the wind. Her sturdy feet were booted with sense if without elegance; her squarish figure was serviceably clothed in a rough tweed costume; a grey felt hat pulled securely, if unbecomingly, down on the loosened folds of hair.

Mr. Chamier was presented, Max attached himself to the little group, and a few moments later they were bending before the whirling blast in the freshened street.

"Which is your way, Mr. Linders?" came Valentine's cool question.

Max hesitated, then spoke hurriedly. "I shall walk, permission granted, part of the way with these young ladies."

Veronica, furs tossing about the escaping curls of bronze hair, had a sudden inspiration. "Let us all walk to the Tarn," she suggested.

Valentine assented eagerly, Max surlily, and Jennie indecisively. She threw occasional perturbed glances at this addition to their ranks. She had a profound distrust for what she called "swells." Some day, one would come like this and take Ronnie from her arms, coolly, with indifferent contempt. Could she bear it if this were he that she had dreaded? . . . Ah, sooner would she give her to Max,—far, far sooner! As she thought thus, tears started under her lids, and she set her lips hard. . . .

They turned silently up the long, steep slope that led out of the town. Soon, they were treading the narrow way between fields that ended in the broad moor road. No manœuvring had been apparent but Veronica found Mr. Chamier beside her and caught faintly the threads of sound blown back towards them from the two ahead.

Of what did they talk on that first night together? Afterwards, looking back, it seemed to Veronica that never from the first moment had they been acquaintances only. There was something fantastic in the swiftness with which he mounted to the inner sanctuary of her being. Progress against the wind was hampered, and their sentences were closely strung in the infrequent lulls; silence hung when a fresh gust swirled,—but what a silence, warm and palpitating, a silence in which unspoken words whispered, like jewels brighter for the dark grotto

in which unseen they lie! In the girl's utterances could be heard the boundless optimism of youth, the vivid desire for knowledge, the home call, the half-stifled Wanderlust, the longing for beauty and poetry and colour, the shamed recognition of ugliness that must be thrust down, scotched like a noxious reptile in her path. In the man's broken sentences, the music of London streets, the spaciousness of the veldt, the fascination and lure of tropical forests where he had cut and plunged through the densely-massed growth in search of fabled orchids. As he spoke, she heard the purring sound of Southern seas where sapphire waters drowsily lapped on beaches starred with shells like gems; heard from the shade of the Mogra trees barbaric clash of music that the spell of the Indian night wove into harmony: saw the flash of supple, polished brown bodies poised on gold-grey rocks before they clove the air to fall like statues into the warm embrace of coral-girdled bay; tasted glowing fruits like wine, and sensed the perfume of flowers whose potent drug wrapped the will in veils of dreams and brought ambition quivering to the couch of rich red earth! And, as a subtle background to his pictures, the vague suggestions that roused sleeping fancies,—the spell of women's hands weaving forgetfulness, the close-clasped fragrance of women's bodies, the frail tie made by women's rose-wreathed hair, the language of sleepy laughter from half-closed eyes, the passion of red lips in seeking sought,—fragile tendrils of fancy, swaying, products of a balmier air, in the stiff, moorland breeze. . . .

A full moon had risen; flickering it shone as the tattered rags of cloud were driven over it and torn apart. Max and Jennie were waiting at the crest of moorland where the tarn lay, a moment silver, a moment jet. Valentine and Veronica drew near to them in seeming silence, but the girl knew that this man had some strange power to read her inmost thoughts; that on the echoing shore of his knowledge the restless wave-beat of her longing

would be flung assuaged. Just as she had known previously that Guy would be her friend, so she knew now that this stranger would never again be stranger to her; that, for good or ill, intimacy between them had already forged its link. She gave him something of herself in a long glance held by the unwavering calm of his. For a second their hands met, fell apart; and in a moment more they caught the end of Jennie's remark: "It's the Spring goods that keep us so busy; it seems as if passymenteary is going to be all the rage."

The four walked back together down the broad moor road into Burling Lane, and it did not matter now that the wind split and distorted the trivial words they spoke. In Veronica's heart echoed the golden promises that she had recognised under his lightest remark. In his glance she read his thought; "You are utterly sweet!" She knew that from the depth of her own had sped the answer, —"And you—you are wonderful!"

Gold faded to dun colour for a brief moment as the girl halted for Good-night at the archway of Veronica's home. For Jennie clung to her hand and whispered, hurriedly, hastily, tumbled words of concern, warning, —lapsing into the old colloquialisms, long-buried beneath the veneer of young ladyhood,—hateful words that quenched the glow in Veronica's heart. "I'd be flayed o' yon chap," she murmured, as once before when they fled from the shattered peace of the moor; and her head jerked backward to indicate where Valentine stood slightly apart, chatting easily to the unresponsive Max, raking the line of buildings with slow-moving, careless-seeming eye, in the comparative quiet of the tree-sheltered, moon-flooded road.

CHAPTER II

PATIENTLY, Veronica set herself, by demure and devious ways, to learn more of the new member of the "D.A.D.S." For Chamier did not attend rehearsal on the following Tuesday, and the next week brought only a note for the flattered President to say that his part fitted him well, and he hoped to sustain it with intelligence if not with conspicuous brilliance on his return to Beighlington the following week. Then, Veronica, amused by the open and exhilarating detestation of Miss Miller, bent her charms to envelop the impossible Charlie Bird, and glean along the byeways of his conversation the information she desired.

Mr. Chamier, said the clerk in his dreadful, scrooping voice, was a real gent, undoubtedly the jennywine material, freehanded and careless. Not much of an 'and at 'ap'ny nap, perhaps, Mr. Bird had won as much from him in a day as would pay for a week's matutinal pork-pies and beer. They all liked him, helped him in his work, casting a squint over his letters and statements of accounts to save him a carpeting from old Josh, who was a stickler for correct addition. Mr. Bird knew the reason of Mr. Chamier's absence, for the latter had confided in the clerk that unless he could attend a Conference on the Racial Question at Lincoln the following week, for which event he had received exclusive and profitable information, the skies were doomed to fall. Mr. Bird had even gone so far as to ask Mr. Chamier to undertake the care of 'arf-a-quid to support the claims of Arab Chief,—and, providentially, a few mornings later had arrived an urgent letter from an aunt on the Chamier

side,—proper swells,—demanding ocular evidence of her nephew's continued existence, a state she seemed to imagine next to impossible in that vague and vulgar, rich and dirty North.

So Mr. Bird talked, and Veronica listened, eyes shining. He was coming back,—and he liked her. The thrush in the almond tree had never sung so sweetly as now; the flowers had never shone so gold, gleamed so marble-white, been dowered with so royal a purple.

And then, one Friday afternoon, going homeward from school past the shops, brave in Spring cleanliness and new paint, she came face to face with him, sauntering along the broad pavement of Caven Street, sauntering, and glancing apparently unconcernedly about him. Veronica, a little weary after the week's demands, had almost been tempted to hail a passing tram-car, now opulently electric; but the charm of shop-windows had prevailed. It was the last day of the month, Good Friday as they called it at Barron Road School, and seven sovereigns jingled beside a few silver coins in her bag. She knew mother would only smile indulgently if she called at Dernier's and procured a bewilderingly lacy blouse which for days had called to her in wheedling tones, "Only seven and eleven!" And when she had reached the shop a hasty glance had shown her that the foamy confection was gone,—basely supplanted by a terra-cotta horror in corded velveteen. And, almost before the pang of disappointment had made itself felt, she had seen him, splendidly garbed in faultlessly-cut grey, creased trousers falling over shining boots, dark overcoat hanging across one arm so that a glimpse of soft, rich satin was apparent, and carrying openly in his hand the pale cardboard of an immense and unmistakable box of chocolate, barred by its insignia of cherry-coloured ribbon. How she blessed the purchaser of the coveted blouse, as, dimpling deliciously, she laid her hand in his; the contemplation even, of such a disaster as being swirled

in the vortex of happy, Friday, country customers in Dernier's, while Valentine strolled by, veiled blue eyes lazily yet narrowly searching the thronged streets for her approaching figure, appalled her. For she never doubted that it was she whom he sought. From other and charmed circles he had come back to her; his eyes appraised her, and, she knew, found her very fair. Her fatigue vanished; her heart sang; he turned, and they walked on together.

Soon they were out of the clamour of Caven Street, walking leisurely into the quiet of Burling Lane, the vista of greening trees a-sheen before them.

"You are well?" he asked, turning his pale face towards her in approving scrutiny.

"I am always in the rudest health. You have had a little holiday, I hear."

He nodded. "The exchequer must be replenished occasionally," he said with a slight baring of white teeth under the small moustache. "I laid a few pieces of good red gold on a noble quadruped, and he, gallant beast, bore them round a trip of smooth turf, and miraculously restored them to me, multiplied twenty-fold."

The black and brass gates of Bevan park stood invitingly open. He waved his hand towards them. "Are you in a hurry? No? Then shall we——?"

They found a sheltered, secluded bench under a giant lauristinus, and sat down. About them the earth was gay with crocuses, and here and there pierced by the green grey lances of daffodils.

"Like lollipops?" he asked, quizzically, laying the shining box in her hands. He feasted his eyes on her beauty, —the lovely shape of head,—in his mind he used the word that she had given to him,—patrician! He smiled at the thought. But it would not be banished. Her hands, too, the long fingers resting on the gay ribbons of the box, the curved nails delicately tinted as porcelain. What a find! Unique, surely. His glance travelled to

the sweep of loosened, burnished hair, knotted on the nape of her neck. "Ass that I was, though, that cerise is not your shade, is it? Don't accuse me, however, of purchasing these for some dark-haired damsel; I was in a frenzy lest you passed while the prehistoric female at the confectioner's was prowling among her wares, and grabbed the first likely-sized box she hauled forth. But blue's your colour, isn't it? Blue," studying her intently,—"or a soft, deep green."

"I like blue best, I think. There's a greeny-blue, though, one sees the tint I mean, prosaically enough, on a cabbage field sometimes, a lovely shade with a bloom as soft as that of a grape on it."

"Can't remember ever seeing cabbage,—the uncooked variety, that is. I must look for it now you have opened my eyes to its possibilities."

Nothing very enlightening or wonderful about such a conversation, yet both laughed, looking into each other's eyes with something of marvel and delight.

"If you would consent to be my friend and mentor, we might go hunting together," he ventured.

Her whispered "Yes," was shyly spoken.

"Then what do you say to beginning to-morrow? What about Leeds as a suitable prospecting ground? We might dine and do a theatre. I could ring them up and order raw cabbage-leaf decorations, so that you could convince me that the tender tone was really your shade. You won't mind my looking long and longingly at your eyes,—your glorious eyes,—during the study, will you?"

Veronica drew slightly away. Instantly he was all penitence.

"Ah, that was unpardonable," he apologised. "But forgive me, won't you?"

"Yes, of course. . . . But I think I could not possibly accept——"

Oh, alluring prospect! Must she refuse? As she dallied with the temptation to accept, pushing it from

her only to grasp it again, slow steps became noticeable on the hard asphalt pathway. A tall figure rounded the curve, eyes on open book. As he drew abreast, he lifted them, true, honest eyes, clear, set widely apart upon a splendid brow,—the brow of a student,—the eyes of a dreamer of dreams. A look of bewilderment crept into them,—something, as they rested on the languid grace of the man beside her that the girl read as scorn,—the contempt of the worker for the idler. It was gone in a second; the intruder smiled affectionately, bowed slightly, raised his hat, and passed on, forefinger in the pages of his latest find from Dan Butt's box. The footsteps died away; Brian Courage had gone homeward to his lonely rooms, solaced only by the inanimate friends that clustered and clung in their shabby leather bindings about his walls.

Veronica knew a spasm of regret that he had seen her; the next instant she crushed it. "It is absurd to think he minded; he has never grudged me friends." Nor anything else, urged a faithful memory . . . always he had given,—lavishly, grandly,—pouring his all into her heaped hands. . . .

"But why?" Very calmly, almost indifferently her companion spoke.

"Why——?" Veronica had travelled over years in these quickly-passing moments.

"Why will you not come? . . . Perhaps I am too late? . . . Herr Linders, did you call him?—has forestalled me?"

Her denial was emphatic. . . . Nothing to be feared in that quarter, he thought, contentedly, drawing out his cigarette case. She saw now that a scrolled and much curved "V" in pearls meandered over it,—a magnificent toy. He held it lightly, tapping it with polished finger nails, grey glove removed. There was something fascinating, dilettante, about the idle, tapping fingers. She watched them intently, ringing on the precious metal,

sounding it as though the smallest speck of alloy would be evident to their touch. And while he tapped, he spoke; softly, insidiously pleading. Why was she so suddenly aloof? He had thought on their moorland walk, —that enshrined, never-to-be-forgotten night,—that they were to be friends. . . . Well, then, how show his desire to serve her? Friendship was dependent upon meeting, —meet they must! . . . All at once she knew that he had joined the Dramatic Society for her,—a comic gathering it seemed to him, no doubt, amusing in a raw, bizarre way,—the palling of entertainment, the fag of memorising only to be endured that he might rehearse with her, clasp her in his arms in embraces that, thrilling, she knew would hold no pretence. . . . There it was,—his plea went on,—meeting then was imperative; he awaited her behests. . . . He had thought the theatre would attract her,—but he was her slave, her commands were law. Quite suddenly she capitulated. Her eyes betrayed the joy of her surrender.

Instantly the insinuating voice lost its cajolery, became calmly matter-of-fact. There was a good train at five-thirty,—would that suit? He would wait in the booking-hall; if it were crowded, under the clock. . . . Oh, station clocks, what rendezvous you have seen, smiled upon behind your shielding hands, ticking on inexorably to the hour of parting. . . . He would order the dinner,—a little banquet if the provinces held the wherewithal, to mark the beginning of their friendship. . . . "And if we agree to celebrate the close of it likewise," he said momentarily serious, "that is a meal I hope never to have the pain of ordering."

"Oh, I hope you never will," answered Veronica, with a sudden little rush of passion in her voice.

"We shall have to cut the last act probably, if we are to get the ten-thirty back. Will that be too late for you,—say, ten minutes after eleven?"

"No, I think that will do. . . . My—father—is seldom

home until half-past eleven. I can rely on you to bring me back by then?"

"Surely. A taxi from the station will whirl us up here in five minutes."

"I must go now. Good-bye,—and thank you for these." She touched the huge box nestled beneath her arm.

"Au revoir to-morrow," he said, gravely, and held her hand a long moment. Too soon they reached the archway, and Veronica, smiling happily, disappeared. The man lit a cigarette and walked slowly, meditatively, back to the bustling town.

On a day of the previous summer, Mrs. Quening had rummaged in the depths of an old trunk that stood half-forgotten in an unused attic, and bestowed upon the delighted Veronica the silken gown in which she had been led to the altar by the late Mr. Bishop. Under the apple trees in the hidden garden Veronica and Jennie had re-modelled the splendid garment; mossy-green was its colour,—(the material had been the gift of a free-handed mistress to her faithful Susan, and its opulence had warred and won from the bride's deep-rooted superstition against its ill-omened tint,)—golden lights shimmered on it, black shadows lurked in its folds. And, despite the stitch-marks of its multitudinous frills, still obstinately apparent notwithstanding Jennie's artful ruses; despite the alarms and excursions of fagoting and buttoning and tucking and pleating and swathing from which her friend had been powerless to divert that nimble needle; the garment was beautiful. Veronica knew that it was wonderfully becoming, and in her little bedroom on the following afternoon, a dazzling first of April, she tenderly lifted it from its envelope of discarded bolster-case, and watched the lights and shadows playing over its supple breadths.

Lights and shadows were playing, too, over the greening garden; everywhere, tufts and fringes and spikes

and tassels of baby tenderness were jutting from the erstwhile black and naked trees. Spring had come with a flurried rush to Beighlington; the bourgeoning of the earth was new begun,—and from the girl's heart were starting the tentative springtime growths of wonder and joy and expectation, and a longing such as she had never known before. A soft west wind carried secrets of the re-awakening marvels of the great moor; Veronica leaned from the window and felt it blowing mild on dewy lips and carmine cheeks. This vernal time for her was ever a period when strange yearnings whispered and clamoured; when the wafted breath of violets brought the quick tears stinging to her eyelids, and the song of a mellow-throated linnet sent her thoughts far out on the wings of desire. Elusive fancies, like butterflies, on which in the grey dusk a moment the hand almost closes, fluttered in her mind,—then gently took their vague, trembling flight. A vagrant pulse would suddenly hammer in her throat or temple; dim, beckoning shapes hovered in the massed clouds; about the ranks of distant trees faun-like forms leapt and gambolled. The world grew full of a strange, rich mystery. More fastidious than ever she became in the care of her dainty body; her hair was brushed and burnished to a new brightness. The coarse foods that had satisfied the winter appetite became intolerable; rough woollen garments unthinkable. . . . As Spring advanced leisurely; genially towards Summer, smell and touch took greater sensitiveness, hearing more delicate acuteness, so that often afar, she caught "the horns of elf-land faintly blowing." With the dawn and the waking of singing birds in every leafy nook, soft tremors shook her, so that often she would lie face downwards, on arms curved along the pillow for the sheer sensuous joy of feeling their satin-smooth coolness beneath her sleep-flushed cheeks. Delicious languors of night soothed her, when she would lie listening to the sounds she loved,—the moorland wind that had the sough of the sea, the faint rustling and

swooping of night birds, the velvety drumming of moths lured by the yellow flame of the lamp by which she had been reading. Or, lamp extinguished, she would watch the stars as they swam out, red, and silver and palest green, on the bosom of the night, richer and softer than the darkest, deepest pansy; or the stars would pale, and she knew that in the East a moon like a great gold guinea had spun up above the factory chimneys; or again, after nights of secrecy and shadow, she would see, as she undressed, the stars all clustering, guarding the shallow pearl shallop of the young moon, slipping from the breast of the skyey sea to anchorage in a cleft of the hushed and stealthily-waiting moor. And, gazing thus, effortless fugitive lines would drift into her mind; sometimes in the silence she would say them aloud, and then they seemed sonorous and splendid; by morning they were generally forgotten, so that she seldom knew if they had value. Occasionally, in the daytime, as she watched the bent heads of her pupils intent above their smudged and finger-marked exercises, she would recall odd scraps and jot them down:—

> "All, all is still,
> And great stars spill like pearls from out night's sapphire jar;
> And on the moor moonbeams have made
> An escalade,—each rung a shining, silver bar."

And now and again, she would shyly hand the fragment to Brian when he called to bring her a new book; but oftener, would smile and shake her head, and crumple the paper and toss it away; so that hundreds of her fancies, crude and immature, yet, because of that, instinct with the fresh spontaneity of youth, were lost, and could never afterwards be recaptured.

But to-day her very heart seemed to sing. She bathed, and robed herself in the silken dress that was itself a sheath of Spring, and, covering it with her long, dark coat, went down to where Mrs. Quening, bustling about

among her household gods, paused, wondering at the radiance of her face.

"Bless you, Ronnie, child, you look as if someone had left you a fortune."

"I am going now, mother. You will wait up for me, won't you? Don't lock the archway gate, then you will not need to come out when I get back. I shall be late and it will be cold then."

Unexpectedly, Mrs. Quening asked a question.

"You've stopped caring about Max since you came home from College, Ronnie?"

Veronica looked at her in silence for a moment, nonplussed. Then she said hesitatingly, "He eats rather noisily, doesn't he, mother?" She felt the colour rising in her cheek, and stooped above her glove. "But I think it is most that we do not think alike in any way,—he cares not at all for books. . . . I like him still when he is playing his violin,—he is different then. . . . But, —well, he wouldn't be playing it all the time, mother,— and——"

"You feel real happy?"

"Oh, mother, dear,—so happy!"

"Then enjoy yourself, honey,—I can trust you to do it wisely. . . . You'll know mother's thinking of you, —thinking near all the time. . . . This Mr. Chamier's quite the gentleman, I suppose?"

"Yes, mother."

"Well, I don't see how any man could be anything but good . . . and decent . . . to you, Ronnie! You're quite the little lady," proudly. "I'll be bound he'll think you do him credit. . . . Just always be careful,—not too trusting, dear. . . . You've a lot to make of your life yet,—and please God, you're going to do it."

She stood looking out on the courtyard for a few moments after the girl had sped away,—looking out, and seeing nothing of the pristine green and primrose that laced the trees. One big tear rolled slowly down,

hung for a second on the high cheek-bone, then fell. She made a gesture as though she would fling her apron over her smoothly-banded grey hair, and weep . . . and weep. "I've lost her!" she said aloud, quite steadily. "Oh, such a little time it seems! . . . and she's gone. She'll never want me just the same again. . . . Ah,—what an old fool I am,—and him a gentleman, as I've wished a hundred times. . . . And he won't take her away neither,—he'll ha' to stop in Beighlington if so be he's to be old Freeman's heir,—I'll warrant the old chap's rich too. . . . What more can I want for my girl,—my darling?" . . . Then she turned and finished drying the jug that she had set down, dried it and hung it on the hook of the dresser, spout turned to the left like all the others in the row. And, on a sudden thought she smiled, and opened a drawer and took out a tiny pasteboard and miniature rolling-pin which often the child Veronica had used to press the rapidly greying dough of long-gone days. "Perhaps . . . some day . . ." she whispered, replacing them with tender, plump fingers, and shutting the drawer softly. . . .

The spell of Spring had touched even the unlovely villages and towns that lie between Beighlington and the big Northern city. Everywhere, in the sad gardens that fronted the grimy brick rows of houses, in the parks, set like gaily-coloured handkerchiefs wherever a break in the chimneys and roofs gave opportunity, in the fields, in the wet lanes where patches of blue had tumbled into shining puddles,—the goddess had passed with her basket of treasure and flung down guerdon from her dower. The train sped along, past little rivers chuckling as they ran, past yellow roads and grey bridges and trees full of breaking buds. The crisp air blowing through the open windows was a heady stimulant.

Veronica and Valentine looked at each other, smiled often, and talked in low voices. Intimacy linked them

as the railway linked the busy towns, knots in a dun-coloured cord. . . . But their thoughts were like a silver ribbon, and rapture painted the glowing beads with which it was strung. He began to tell her of the Boer War, already receded into the limbo of things half-forgotten, but its thrill renewed as he told her that there he had fought,—been wounded. . . . He spoke of the magic and charm of veldt loneliness,—and of the strange, wild fervour that came to him in the secret places of the earth; of the eagerness with which he had seized the chance to accompany some men who had gone orchid-hunting in the tangled forests near the Amazon; of how death had come very near to him in those foetid swamps, and of how when the fever had mounted almost to delirium, he had heard through the ecstatic triumph of his companions, coming suddenly upon some magnificent, long-searched-for crest of bloom,—the roll of the Christchurch organ, and had seen plainly, not the great trees rampant with the flamboyant racemes of giant, interlaced creepers,—but the quiet evening sky hanging like a sheet of gold-veiled blue above the boat-haunted waters of the Iffley reach. A throb caught her heart. So he loved Oxford, also! Another link between them. . . . Soon they passed the old Abbey, parts of which still stand to throw defiance to the iconoclasts of factory and workshop and warehouse; and in a few minutes more ran into the thronged and hideous station. Hansom cabs rattled past them, scorned by the smooth-running taxis; and sandwich-men, grotesquely hung with puffs of eating- houses and cheap jewellery and notices of chapel services shuffled hopelessly by, empty pipes hanging, bowl downwards, over unshorn chins, eyes dulled and rheumy. It was hard to believe that the Rev. So-and-So could preach convincingly from his text, announced in four-inch-long capitals, "Consider the Lilies of the Field," should he chance first to stroll past these sad wrecks with their matted hair and decay-filled mouths and deplorable hats and dreadful

boots. . . . Had even these, Veronica mused, a moment saddened by the spectacle, once gazed eagerly into the silver mirror of imagination, and seen signs and wonders of the future written there? . . . .Now, their eyes sought the gutter, glintlessly, ceaselessly; and when a passer-by flung roadwards a stump of cigar or end of cigarette, their talons grovelled together in the mud.

"Too early for dinner yet," said Valentine, hand beneath her arm as he piloted her through the seething crowds, their broad vernacular frequently volubly broken by a wave of Yiddish as a cluster of heavy-featured Jews and Jewesses jostled past, chattering vivaciously. "And it is useless to buy flowers for you, of course. But I want to get you something," unheeding her faint protest. "Chocolates, gloves,—scent. What do you say to scent? Here's a place. . . ."

It was a great glass house of a building, softly lighted and generously warmed, brimming with books and blotters, pottery and purses of suede and silver and gold, pictures and photograph frames, powders and puffs and patchouli. In the centre of the floor stood a gilt table, and on the table a great crystal flower, from which, momentarily, a hidden mechanism flung a mist of perfume. Veronica paused, childishly delighted with the novelty, her companion pleased at her delight. Her freshness and naiveté were enchanting after. . . . He left the thought incomplete.

"Lovely!" the girl exclaimed, ecstatically sniffing the odour. "Night-scented stock, too!"

A young lady to whom Nature had been niggardly in the matter of waist and prodigal as regards teeth, stepped forward. "Moddam would like her handkerchief perfumed," she said, tonelessly, swaying her smooth hips. "Allow me!"

Veronica relinquished the small square of muslin, regained it, while Valentine murmured a question.

"Twelve-and-six a flagon of this size, sir,—or in painted case a guinea. Thank you, sir."

Carelessly he received her shyly-spoken thanks; they walked on. Near them, a customer, also in painted case, and quite evidently a very expensive article, turned to stare stupidly at them. She had perched her pet dog on the glass-topped counter, and a becurled assistant was endeavouring to fit silver collars round its yapping throat. Seated beside her, a gross man, across whose laughter-shaken stomach a great cable of watch-chain was strained, fondled the woman's ungloved hand, sliding the rings up and down her slender fingers with his thick proprietary ones. Veronica saw her recoil sharply, and edge aside. And now in their slow sauntering between the laden counters, it seemed to her quick fancy that such vignettes of life, its mystery, its pain, its secrets, sprang to view at every moment. There, an enormous woman in a childish hat that failed to conceal the bluish-whiteness of her face, like tinted blotting-paper that had absorbed three great black warts as blots, was intently examining sticks of lip-salve. Unable to bend owing to the iron clasp of corset, she depressed her head so that three chins like folds of tripe appeared, wobbling away into her smart fichu, that fell, a foaming cascade of lace over the mountain of her elevated bosom. . . . They strolled on, pausing at one of the screens where were exhibited brilliantly-coloured pictures, representing some moment of silken dalliance or decorously-restrained passion. Beyond the screen two of the ultra-smart shop-girls were snatching a brief, whispered conversation. . . . "Heard from your chap yet?" . . . "No." . . . "Say, that's rotten 'ard lines! Golly, my ankle's bad to-day. Feels as if the veins was bursting through me stockings. Dang these patent leathers!" . . . "They don't *give*, do they?" sympathetically, "and it's so 'ot in 'ere." . . . And the girls drifted non-

chalantly apart as a frock-coated shop-walker appeared in the distance. . . .

Outside the sandwich men groped in the gutter, or painfully straightened weary backs and shuffled onward.

The big restaurant with its snow-covered islands of tables set thickly on the smooth blue sea of its velvet pile carpet, was full of a softly subdued glow of light that had a becalming effect upon the garish white and pink and gold of its exotic decorations. To Veronica, entering in the glory of woodland-green silk frock, it seemed a fascinating place,—altogether different from yet equally attractive as the ordered quiet and rich solidity of Swarthe,—full of allurement of bright dresses and gay flowers and sparkle of wine and sound of music from the balcony where an excellent string band had sailed out from the peace of snowy archipelago into the choppy sea of syncopated time.

Valentine smiled across the reserved table at her. A pink-shaded electric lamp flung a pool of rosy light between them. Little bowls of violets were bathed in the soft radiance; a thrill of excitement set Veronica's pulses beating, and the faint aroma of the mauve blossoms seemed a heady, poignant thing,—that, or the perfume of night-scented stock,—or perhaps just the incense of admiration that emanated from her companion gave her a spasm of dizzying pleasure. . . . Life was opening like a many-petalled rose; from creamy yellow it deepened at the heart to passionate flame-colour.

They sampled the hors d'œuvres; finished their soup. In a shining bucket a gold-headed bottle lay on its bed of cracked ice. The music hummed through the unbeautiful sound of Northern voices; the waiters padded by on soft, untiring feet. The pleasant din was heightened by the clink of glasses and coin, the popping of corks, the roar of street traffic without.

Valentine watched the girl with his secret, unsmiling eyes.

"You are extraordinarily appreciative, aren't you?" he said. "Without being in the least juvenile, you have a wonderfully rejuvenating effect."

"Have I? But you do not need rejuvenating, surely?"

He played with his fork. "Yes, I am blasé," he admitted. "Never had enough work to do, I suppose, until now,—and I find it nauseating and chafing to have to go definitely to the office at ten o'clock and remain there until five."

"Why do it, then? Could you not find something to do that you would enjoy?" She spoke lightly, yet was conscious of a sudden, heavy fear that the narrow bounds of Beighlington would fail to hold this wandering spirit to whom she recognised the free, far places of the earth called with so strong a lure. But a glimpse of her face in a distant mirror reassured her. . . . Fierce power flamed up in her. . . . She could hold him, fast . . . fast. . . .

"Ah, heaps of things," he was answering, gaily. "I would like to climb mountains in Switzerland, pot big game in Africa, pearl-fish in the Southern Seas, or tusk-hunt in the jungle, or paint pictures in Andalusia, or ——" He waved his hand expressively, and his eyebrows shot whimsically upwards. "But my good uncle Joshua sees in these things the wile of the devil, and he is determined to save my soul alive even at the expense of a thousand a year, which is the dear old chap's contribution towards my worthless upkeep. He pays the piper and, I suppose, has a right to call a psalm tune if he wishes."

"Do you live with him at Slingsby House?"

"Lord,—no! I have a nice little crib along Stepton Road,—Moss Grange,—don't you know it?—lies back in a clump of lilac trees. My man, Hyles, who was with me in Africa, and an old girl who is a decent cook,

look after me famously." He leaned forward and looked at her with those disconcertingly unflickering eyes. "You must come and see my house and garden one of these days,—Véronique."

She blushed slightly. "I know the house," she said. "I used to pass it on my way to the Grammar School, but now that I am teaching, I go townwards. It is a pretty place, but lonely; so shut in by trees, the girls used to call it the 'Haunted House.'"

It was the first time he had given her a name, and she liked the unfamiliar distinctiveness of it, and the soft pronunciation of one to whom the French tongue was a wholly familiar thing. There was something not quite English about him, she thought now, despite his striking fairness. Perhaps he was of foreign descent. He used his hands more freely than most Englishmen, and there was a playful gaiety about him that was full of charm. He was as typical of the warm South as Max was, notwithstanding his almost Italian colouring, of the well-fed stolidity and self-esteem of Germany, or as Brian was of the humour-tinged gravity and stability of sea-girdled Britain. She asked him if he had French blood in him, and he confessed to three or four drops, blue but thin. That he loved Paris dearest of all cities she knew. He began to talk to her of its theatres, the gay life of boulevard and restaurant. In imagination she passed with him through the swing-doors of those close little eating-houses that hang in too-savoury bunches in the labyrinth of streets netted between the river and the Luxemburg. Or, in another mood, he took her, faultlessly attired, among the now-vanished tables of Philippe's or the Maison d'Or. Or he crossed the Channel again, and they were in London together, wending a course eastward from Piccadilly Circus to the restaurants of Dean Street. Here, under this low doorway, floats the odour of the finest veau saute carotte in Europe. It will cost you fivepence, neatly served, and it is said

that Monsieur the Proprietor, who will set your tenpenny bottle of wine before you with all solemnity is one of the finest judges of claret in town, and knows the psychological moment when to lift from the ice the champagne frappé that awaits him at his own not too modest dinner table.

"You would enjoy seeing London with me, wouldn't you?" He touched her hand a moment with a soft caress. "And there is Vienna and its gipsy-music, and Berlin, and St. Petersburg,—I would love to show them all to you. For you *do* like things so awfully," he went on boyishly, "don't you? You look naively and deliciously satisfied, sitting there, listening to those fiddles scraping, and seeing these good folk feed unimaginatively, and I'm afraid injudiciously."

"Yes, I am feeling very happy," she said, simply.

"Are you always so praiseworthily contented?"

"Not quite always," she admitted. "But when I am not, things,—nice things,—have a kindly knack of happening. So that when a Saturday comes heralded by a deluge of rain, I generally find I have been lucky in securing a particularly fascinating book, or someone has sent me a long letter, or Jennie makes me a successful blouse, or we have muffins for tea, or the first primroses are out."

"Ah, I see you are a genius at discovering the redeeming feature in the most hopeless outlook. Now I'm not like that, I fear; if my plans are frustrated, I feel like raising the devil of a futile row,—and generally do it, too," he added.

His unsmiling eyes that so emphatically contradicted the gaiety of well-cut lips, rested on her approvingly. "And is the worthy,—if tubby—Jennie responsible for that Spring creation?"

"Yes, she is," answered Veronica, with a just perceptible chill in her voice. "But she isn't—'tubby'—

at least her soul isn't, anyhow. . . . But do you like it, really? It was my mother's wedding dress."

"I do indeed. . . . It is like larches and limes and lemons. By the way, what a lot of perfect things are described by words beginning with the letter 'L'! Light and life and love and laughter and liberty—and luxury and legacies,—and lucre (which isn't a bit filthy in my opinion), and," dropping his voice to a whisper,—"love-letters and lissom limbs and lingering lips."

Veronica gave him a demonstration of laughter, low and silvery. "Don't go on," she protested. "Love has been known to change to loathing, and lissom limbs become lame, limping legs, and laughter, lunacy,—and love-letters, libels, and——"

"Now I expected something more poetical from you than that, Véronique! All the same, I believe you do find something fascinating in words, don't you?"

"Oh, yes, indeed I do! I think you might have added 'Language' to your list. Did you ever read Henley's poem 'Arabian Nights' Entertainment?" He nodded. "When I was a child, how I loved the words he wove into it! I remember lying in a fork of the apple tree with a tattered copy wedged beside me, and gloating over his 'gleeful, golden-vowelled madrigals' and the 'wizen Leprechaun,' and the 'Isles of Khaledan.' What did I care that 'Noureddin Ali' was 'loftily drunk,' with a name like that? And the 'roses of Shiraz,' and the 'walls and towers of Samarcand,' and 'Scheherezade the peerless,' whom I never knew how to pronounce, but only that she was beautiful. . . . Oh, yes, words can be deliciously thrilling, I think."

His pale face flushed to ardour at her interest. How this girl with the vivid eyes and ripe mouth brought back the happy, restless days of his adolescence! He saw again the stained façade of his Irish home, the long, neglected garden where the chipped and broken statues

dully gleamed, and smelt again the damp odour from the dark bog, borne on a vagrant puff of wind. He was a boy again, and he and his sister Denise,—long years dead,—were lying on the coping of the wall over which the chestnuts leaned. . . . She was reading to him, her long fair hair falling across her slender shoulders. . . . Ah! How words for years forgotten rushed into memory, with a perfection well-nigh stupefying. . . . "And didn't we sup on rose-water,—probably tame stuff, but sweetly sounding,—dates, almonds, pistachios, citrons? . . . And the 'vast blue night was murmurous with peris' plumes and the leathern wings of genies.' 'Words of power whispering' indeed!"

She looked at him with sparkling eyes, rimmed about by their black, upcurling lashes. They were like jewels set in jet. And about her neck was a string of stones,—sunk with great beauty into the chased and scrolled links of a necklace, its greens and golds melting into the shades of her dress. Valentine had glanced at the necklet several times since dinner began. Now, as he was eating his forced strawberries,—strangely insipid things, Veronica thought them, like kisses without the sun of love to vivify them,—he spoke of it, easily, carelessly.

"Your jades tone excellently with your frock. The setting is old, is it not?" He had already, astonished, fixed its value.

She unfastened the clasp and slid the shining heap from her hand to his.

"I do not know. . . . In those same childhood's days, I would have told you, and half believed it myself, that it was all that remained of the dowry of my noble Italian mother,—but now, adult accuracy compels me to admit that it was a gift on my twentieth birthday, from—a friend."

"Pretty good judge, too," said Chamier, fingering the stones lovingly, and peering at the quaint and exquisite

setting. "Both of jewels, and of what suits you, Véronique."

She laughed, half abashed.

"My eyes aren't really as dreadfully green as this dress and necklace make them appear," she said, deprecatingly. "Sometimes, when there is not much light, I can almost persuade myself that they are blue. . . . It was given to me by someone whom I met when I was in College; I am very fond of it."

"You may well be. Take care of it, it is valuable. Let me fasten it for you. . . . There!" His fingers had lingered on the cool surface of her neck. And when he turned to her again, though his voice was calm, his face was quite white and his eyes burned, burned, under the lowered brows. For the first time she saw their veiled fires smouldering. . . . Triumph flared in her. Yes, —she could keep him. . . .

"Now," he said, "we had better drink our coffee and amble forth to see 'The Skittish Widow,' had we not?"

CHAPTER III

THAT lovely April was the forerunner of a gracious May, a flower-spangled June, and a melting, breathless July, when the factory workers went with bleached, sweat-beaded faces beneath the towering chimneys that seemed to be pouring all day fiery columns from their thick throats,—along the pavements that were like sheets of lava,—through the streets where the water carts sprayed and where the choking, acrid odour of white dust, flecked for a few minutes with a grey like mildew, rose intolerably to the nostrils. The little winds all lay sleeping in the arms of the brooding moor, and scarcely escaped even to stir her heather tresses. . . .

Gone were the shawls that were the insignia of the mill-girls' bondage; bareheaded they went, in their dingy mill-skirts and "chequer brats" (ample blue and white checked aprons), or at most with heads barred about by metal curling-pins, that the sun threatened to reduce to liquid; singly, they walked languidly, instead of in arm-linked lines, blouses widely opened at the neck and sleeves rolled above pretty elbows. And as the flaming days drew towards red evenings, everywhere from throats that seemed parched, hope and longing came. "If nobbut it hods like this wol t'Feeast!" or, "Emmer, dost wish tha wor at Blackpool to-day, lass?" . . .

In the airless classrooms of the many schools, where the ill-fated half-timers often slept unreproved, the teachers' voices would grow toneless in the heavy atmosphere. And they, too, would murmur among themselves, "Only another fortnight! Have you decided yet?" . . . "Yes, Scarborough's smarter,—but for amuse-

ment, in any weather . . . give me Douglas." Or, "I can't be bothered to make clothes this year,—I shall go to some quiet little place in the Lake District . . . and wear rags . . . and sleep . . ."

The close, windless days affected even the splendid vitality of Veronica. Always slender, despite those gracious curves, she grew slighter. Her great eyes looked larger, more limpid, in the fainter rose-tints of her "small face, buoyant,"—her lips shaped less readily to smiles,—were folded often in wistful longing, and the petal-shadow of that fleeting dimple flickered less often on the smooth cheek.

Valentine had been away from Beighlington during the greater part of June and the first half of July. Ascot and Cowes had seen him; the balm of his presence had been shed on aunts in Wales and cousins in Ireland in brief, but enlivening visits. But now he was returning. Old Joshua Freeman could not have dreamed of so upheaving a change of procedure as failing to take his holidays at the same time as his workpeople; at the end of July, the whirr of machinery, the belching of smoke, the clangour of clogs, would cease for six strangely-still days. Early on the Saturday morning, old Josh, having superintended the weekly reward of his ill-content employees, would shake hands with his graceless nephew, and equally,—though in another sense,—graceless, rotund and trustworthy head clerk, and, stepping into his high dogcart, would direct his handsome pair of bays towards the station, and entrain for Whitby, in whose waters he had fished, and beneath one of whose russet roofs he had slept on every "Feast" holiday for twenty-five years. And as he would not return from these delights for a full fortnight, it behooved Valentine, making half-hearted effort to earn a portion of his thousand a year,—a monstrous sum old Josh deemed it,—to appear at the foundry's re-opening as temporary master.

So each day Veronica rose with the thought in her

heart that soon they would meet again; each afternoon, as she piled the exercise books in the cupboard, or folded the coarse pillow-cases and chemises and night-dresses that the girls had dotted with evidence of needle-pricks or creased with hot, sticky hands, she forgot her tired limbs in the avenue of imagination down which she walked, held close to him. Life for the moment was deary; but it was only like waiting pensively in a darkened theatre; almost immediately the curtain would roll up on a pageant of gold and scarlet and blue. And she would suddenly remember how once she had thought of life,—a set of pictures, each draped by the gauzy veil of years. Sunlight had shone through them all, she thought, but now . . . now . . . Shimmering hung the veil, and behind it the roses of love, the deep-hued blossoms of passion glowed. . . . Jennie, patiently toiling over the needs for the exodus of the family to St. Anne's,—(Gertie had decided to go with a girl friend to another resort to which they alluded gaily and familiarly as "Brid"), was forgotten. Max,—grilling in Beighlington until August, when he intended to accompany a fellow-countryman living in Bradford on a walking-tour about Schaffhausen,—hovered on the horizon of her fancy vague as a shadow. Brian, looking at her with eyes pain-filled and tender, had asked her plans. He himself was bound for the Hardy country,—what did Veronica intend to do? She had answered evasively, dropping the lids over her too-happy eyes. She would not leave Beighlington for a week or two . . . it would be quieter later . . . her mother had gone to wait upon an ailing niece in Northumberland . . . she might go North in a week or so, and bring her home. Ellen, the newly-established servant, would look after Mr. Quening, if she decided to do so . . . Brian had sighed, taken her hand as though he would have spoken further, then, aware through all his being of her averted face and distant manner, had suddenly and unexpectedly lifted the soft fingers and

kissed the smooth palm, and walked swiftly away. . . .

At last came the Friday morning, the first of her vacation, when she clasped in eager hands the letter for whose arrival she had lived the last weeks of endurance, uncomplainingly. Valentine had returned, was writing this to his lovely little Véronique from Moss Grange, which felt like a biscuit tin after the marble desolation of the castle in far Donegal from which he was newly come.

He wrote:

> "'Instead of shore and ocean beats,
> I hear the ebb and flow of streets.'"

"Everything is unbearable, unspeakable until I see you. To-morrow, we must get away for a long day together, —into the country, I think. You must wear a white frock, and we will find green trees and running water. I have heard Stepton woods are pretty,—we will make them our destination. . . ." Then followed direction as to time of train. And he was, as always, her humbly adoring Valentine. . . .

She mused above the picture his words called up; the woods where colonnades of cool, green trees flung shadows of cooler grey about them,—the woods that floated like a brocaded emerald banner behind the age-old towers of Stepton Castle, which flaunted still its proud "Desormais" from the archway above its gate. . . .

She looked up with unclouded eyes to meet the sour gaze of her father across the breakfast table, and their serenity vanished. Hostility swept them as a breeze ruffles a mountain tarn, discovering dark depths unimagined. His sneering face jutted towards her.

"Schoolmaister writing to bid you good-bye?" he muttered, helping himself largely from fried eggs that too closely resembled saffron suns in white-hot skies to appeal to Veronica on such a morning and in such a mood.

She broke her toast and threw him a scornful negative.

"No, tha's getten a new 'un lately, ah'll be b'un'. Soon stalled wi' yer German, worn't you? An' flickin' yer eyes on t' schoolmaister for summat aboon toathry minutes,—then he gets the go-by. Seen some bigger swell nor Brian, 'appen! Mind he doesn't turn out a wry 'un instead," he chuckled with ill-humoured malice.

"Mr. Courage has never been anything but a friend," answered Veronica, hotly, stung to unwonted retort.

"And that's not enough for you, I reckon. You like 'em warmer nor that," with sly innuendo,—"doan't you? Want some stronger poytry i' your love-making than he can give you, eh? 'Come, my beloved, let us go forth into the field. . . . I rose up to open to my beloved, and my hands dropped with myrrh. . . . My beloved is gone down into his garden to the beds of spices. . . . Let my beloved come into his garden . . . and eat his pleasant fruits. . . . Behold thou art fair, my beloved, yea, pleasant, and our bed is green.' Oh, yes," watching the quick blood surge over the satin of her cheeks,—"Ah can read poytry mysen,—an' Ah can read thee, my lass, an' all!"

Veronica sprang up then, swaying like a flower above the suffused and venomous face regarding her mockingly, with that deadly distorted sneer.

"Oh," she breathed passionately, "I wonder if the God you profess to preach, knows how I loathe and despise you? . . . If indeed there *is* a God who could give me such a father,—and yet perhaps there is! . . . And if so, I bless Him that He released my mother from you for ever." She turned and fled blindly away, but not before she had seen again that strange, stricken look that fell like a bleach across the man's reddened brow,—the look that had spread over it years before when last she had spoken to him the name of her dead mother.

A subtle stillness, as of something waiting, lay upon the Stepton woods on that regal Saturday when Valen-

tine and Veronica came threading between the dryad larches and the fountain pines and the tall poplars, which, ceaselessly whispering, yet folded their secrets close. The rooks eddied and sank among the elms; tiny woodland flowers scattered themselves like flakes of mother-of-pearl on the swarthy shadows between the giant boles, countless rosy points of pimpernel starred the mossy turf. In the heart of the quiet wood, a shallow lake gleamed pale as a tarnished shield; and, murmuring of the moor, its mother, a little stream fell through the ferns that already Autumn had touched with hennaed fingers, into its quietude. The dry weather had reduced the dancing brook to a thread, so that on each side of its shining tinsel lay a border of lilac shingle, half-shrouded by butterfly-sprinkled grasses held like fair and graceful slaves in the shackle of tyrant weeds. Some times the stream, eager to reach the sleeping lake, sprang far over a heap of rocks, and its ribbon was shredded to a silver tassel on their sharp teeth.

Beside the lowest of these tiny cascades, the man and girl paused; and Veronica knelt and leaned over the hurrying water and caught its spray between her palms. It was cool and faintly heather-scented; she tossed it between her fingers, and the drops fell again like topazes into the glittering braid.

"This smells honey-sweet after the foundry, Véronique," exclaimed Valentine contentedly, flinging himself down beside her and taking her wet hand in his. "Have you missed me, little girl?"

"You know!"

"Yes, darling, I do. I felt you missing me, wanting me, while I was away,—I believe I could not have faced it all again otherwise." He spoke wearily. "It is as though my very soul were clogged with grease; everything is intolerable,—old Joshua's raucous voice speaking the hideous Beighlington jargon,—Stevenson's ignorant self-righteousness,—the filthy commonness of Bird

and the other clerks, most of them obscene little devils, too,—I bear it all only because of you,—of you. . . . And then I try to fix my mind on your white slimness and grace,—on memories of lonely beaches and pathless woods, of spotless statues and poems pure as the flight of a bird,—Véronique," he bent his fair head suddenly against her arm and spoke in a hurried whisper,—"I can't! . . . I can't! I tried last night,—what a night of Satanic heat!—I tried, dear, I tell you," beating his hand passionately upon the ground,—"and my brain was full of horrors, crawling like serpents. . . . I lay staring up at the ceiling and vowing I would think of a white strand of Florida I know,—all clean as though it were paved with pearls,—no sands like the sands of Honolulu and Florida,—and, Véronique! . . . I could see only a stretch of desert dust, whirled by the Khamsin into horrible mounds under which, half-hidden, torn by bloody-jawed beasts, prowling, prowling, lay unspeakable carrion,—the sand silting into their empty eye-sockets, which yet seemed to stare at the low-spinning vultures ravening for their meal. . . ."

"Oh, Valentine!" breathed Veronica, aghast.

He went on. "Then I thought,—'Half a mile away, Véronique is lying on her bed; she is hot, too, and the thin covering is folded lightly round her,—she is virginal and lovely as a flower,'—and for a minute, I thought I could hold the vision. . . . Then, instead of you, dear, I saw a painted, loathsome thing sprawled on a tawdry couch, whose dirty red silk cushions reeked of some coarse, overpowering scent——" He broke off, shuddering.

"Don't let yourself think of it now, Valentine," urged Veronica, horror-stricken at his avowal. "You must have had a touch of fever."

"Yes, it comes sometimes still,—a relic of Amazon swamps. . . . That, and the dead years that take toll," he finished on a lower note.

"The fever, of course. . . . And when one has imagination, one can visualise all too vividly. . . . But now, see, Valentine, how sweet everything is, it is cool here as if we were sitting in a green cave of the sea. Let us be happy, and forget Beighlington . . . and the other things. . . . I think we have the whole wood to ourselves,—this is better than the pier at Blackpool, is it not?" she asked, whimsically.

"I would rather be alone with you, than with anyone else in the world. . . . I want to ask you something. . . . Give me an ever lovelier vision of you than I have yet had,—loosen your hair, dear,—I want to see its glory——"

Veronica looked at him and smiled. She would give herself up to this day, royally, joyously. In the mosaic of years it should be a jewel, a green, green emerald, that the hand of Fate had set. The day was exquisite there in the silent wood; the intense sunlight filtered between the interlaced boughs and quivering leaves in a shower of broken gold. It dappled the glades and gilded the bracken. All the air was filled with a happy murmuring of birds and bees and gnats and tumbling water. At their feet spread the misted mirror of the lake. But she would not notice that his voice trembled, and she answered lightly, "There's a lot of it,—it's very hot with it down; it is cheery for winter,—but such a—blistering—colour for summer—"

"Do!" The voice was pleading, and the strange blue eyes looked for her compliance.

"There, then!" And she slid the pins from the shining masses and shook them about her. They fell in the loops and curls and soft, burnished rings of childhood's days; scarcely darker than then, their rich tints gleamed in the golden light, burnt on the white of her dress, and glowed like flowers on the green of woodland moss. Valentine was very pale,—something of his searing knowledge of the world was in that moment abrogated; she was

Aenone, and he her young playmate, Paris, on those blue Ionian hills, before the Greek woman had lured him from her. He plunged his hands among those scented, silken ropes, and drew her down towards him as he lay on the soft warm carpet of grass. So still they were that a big tawny butterfly came and perched on a long strand that had fallen over Valentine's arm. He felt all the wondrous softness and sweetness of her as she leant there; her eyes were black as night under the russet shadow of her falling hair. The air swayed about them, showering them with perfume. Time itself seemed to swoon in the palpitating day. Tiny Cupid's darts were released from the pale globes of seeding dandelions, and floated on the breeze; shadow fishes showed a streak of silvery grey as they slid about the stones of the brook; the languid call of a drowsy bird fell through the green arcades, and poplars shivered with a sound of plashing water. Suddenly, Veronica felt a long shudder run through the man's straining body; his hands tightened in the meshes of her hair; she felt herself drawn down, down, closer still until she could no longer see the blue eyes into which she had been gazing. The ripe sweetnss of her mouth was crushed on his in such a kiss as not all her reading had warned her could be; "fire and dew," her whole body seemed melting in the wonder of that embrace; her mouth was the rosy bell of a hyacinth into whose nectar the bee of love was dipping, heavily sweet yet unsated it clung and drank until it seemed the passion of its longing must drain her very heart and still go unslaked. . . . Then as she lay there, half-fainting, with eyes closed and arms heavily weighted, drooping like white fetters about Valentine's shoulders, she was cognisant of a stirring of memory, vague words began to push through her mind,—"Behold, thou art fair, my beloved, yea, pleasant, also our bed is green." . . . With a swift slackening of emotion, she gently disengaged herself from her companion's arms; the carmine stain ran up over the pas-

sion-paled satin of her cheeks; she turned her head and began searching a little wildly for her hairpins in the grass. . . . "No, no," she thought, scornfully, "I will not let my father's horrible suspicions be justified." Then childishly, "But I must not be so close to Valentine that I can feel his dear heart beating so unbearably." . . . After a few minutes she turned again to him, and once more saw the deeps of those cloudy blue eyes stirred, and noticed that his lips were pale and closely set. He watched her without speaking as she coiled up her hair, and pinned the loops deftly into place, and still silent, lay until she reached for the covered luncheon basket that had been reposing in the shade of a moist stone at the side of the stream. He waited moodily, and when he spoke, his voice was roughened.

"You have never been kissed before?"

"Like that,—no!"

"You know I love you?" He caught the little hand that was opening the basket.

"Yes," she whispered.

"And you know that I have loved,—or thought I loved,—many times before?" There was something almost brutal in the question.

Her voice shook a little. "Yes,—I guessed that."

"Sweet! You will forget it. I make no vows, but this I say to you, Véronique. I believe that I shall never love but you again." He pressed his lips to the pink palm, and for a moment the action stabbed her with recollection of Brian. Would he care very deeply? . . . There was pain in the thought of his pain. In that moment, if never before, she knew that he loved her . . . and never had loved . . . never would love another. Came to her, too, the memory of that talk with Guy in the garden arbour of Swarthe,—her claim, youthfully arrogant, of the "best." Was this the lover she had imaged then,—this lover whose hands had fondled so many? For an instant, jealousy, sharp

as a dagger, acute as acid, struck her. . . . if only he had been hers always,—the predestined mate! Ah, but love was cruelly, stingingly sweet! Relentless, too; and as a drug, it deadened caution. Where now her doubt that this man would fitly blend with her friends in the pattern of her life? . . . It mattered not. She saw herself detached, she and Valentine. Uncertainty was gone; everything fell naturally into place. Valentine must perforce spend much of his time in Beighlington. He was different from Guy,—so with sophistry she soothed the last flicker of doubt,—more like one of the young millowners of the neighbourhood,—above her and her people, yet not immeasurably above. His uncle, old Joshua, sprang from the same class as his workmen,—was not illimitably removed from Mr. Dixon . . . her father . . . from Biggs, the foreman. . . . But Valentine was speaking, hurriedly, persuasively, the soft words encroaching one on another.

"Why did you go away from me, Véronique? It was heaven to feel you in my arms, your lashes on my cheek, your hair about me like a heap of flowers, your lovely body warm against me. Why did you grudge me my joy? Were you . . . afraid? . . . It was one of the moments of life, full of the wine of love,—and you broke the glass before it was drained. . . . The door of Paradise was open——"

"One cannot always enter Paradise." She spoke with mock sententiousness.

"*One* never can,—but two! Paradise is for two, sweetheart, and it could be ours this moment. We are alone in this green world. . . . I want to teach you, little rose, how to unfurl your petals to the sun. You are shut like a little bud, close-folded in your innocence. Don't you dream,—don't you dream, Véronique, of the secrets that are whispered to the deep heart of the rose?"

"I can wait," she answered, growing pale again.

"But I cannot, dearest." In his voice was a ring of

ferocity. "I cannot! Don't you know,—don't you realise," pulling her towards him so that her face lay on his shoulder, "what I feel when I see these men about you coveting your sweetness,—that German, Linders, with his eyes burning your white body,—the schoolmaster who passed us that day in the park,—others, I have no doubt, everywhere you go? It cannot be otherwise. It is because of you that I cannot sleep,—you could fill all my nights with dreams of you." He fell to kissing her hair, her closed eyes, her cheek, her throat. She lay captive, pulses fluttering. And the voice went on, soothing, insidious. "You know I cannot marry you openly, —yet,—dearest,—old Joshua would disinherit me. He is not too well-pleased with me at the best of times. I am almost wholly dependent on him,—oh, Véronique,—would you not——?"

She moistened her lips and whispered a query.

"You mean,—you want us to be married—secretly?"

"Yes,—yes,—something like that," he answered with a sudden stammer. "Our love would be all the sweeter that it was in secret we enjoyed it, don't you think?"

"I—I don't know. . . . But one thing,—I must tell my mother, anyhow."

"Darling, that would be fatal. No one must know."

"Not even Jennie?" she asked, piteously.

"No, no!" impatiently. "Can't you see, darling rosebud, how impossible that would be? I daresay Jennie is romantic,—most plain people are,—and all Beighlington would know directly."

"You are unjust, Valentine,—you do not understand. Jennie is utterly loyal." She felt thrilled no longer, but offended, and just a little frightened. Again she drew herself out of the fold of his arm, and went on unpacking the basket. She forced herself to speak carelessly, though her heart was beating heavily.

"Well, we can't be married in this woodland glade, can we? So come and have lunch,—it is almost three

o'clock. See, the hotel people have given us chicken and cucumber sandwiches, and raspberries and two dear little jars of cream. Will you open the wine? Now let us spread the cloth on this flat rock, and I will gather some convolvulus trails to lay across it. Aren't they lovely? —like cups of sunset-tinged snow!"

But Valentine was silent, with a silence that held something thwarted but not forgotten, something hidden, yet not destroyed. Veronica was silent too, listening to the thronging questions of her brain. A secret marriage? Her mother would not like that,—and Guy, if he knew, would think there was something sinister in such a proposal to the girl whom he had thought worthy to set beside him in the high light of the world. And yet . . . and yet . . . she would not harm her lover. She knew he was dependent on his dour and tight-fisted old uncle,—perhaps her duty lay in acceding to his suggestion. Then another thought smote her. If they were married,—loving as they did,—there would be children. Veronica adored children. The thought of a tiny baby with downy head nestling against her breast and Valentine's blue eyes looking into hers, knocked at her heart. . . . Then everyone would know,—they would have to admit they were married,—and she trembled at the vision of the iron-master's fury. Or Valentine would take her away to some sweet love-nest,—here came a picture of the cherry-orchard villages about Sinodun, and their jewelled gardens, beside which the silver trail of the Thames wound. . . . But in that case, she must tell her stepmother. On that she was determined. She glanced at Valentine. He looked almost sulky, and his eyes were more veiled than ever. Then suddenly, as she looked, his smile flashed out, and the dark cloud vanished.

"What a surly brute I am, to be sure!" he said. "Forgive me, darling, love is a strange task-master. Let us forget our problems, dear, and go a-wandering. Come, another glass of wine,—to the smooth course of our true

love! . . . Now, let us pack up, and explore the forest glade together."

Seven o'clock found them at dinner in the panelled parlour of the old inn, where a rosy-cheeked maid waited upon them as though in complete understanding of momentous decisions arrived at in Stepton woods. "They doan't look as if they'd been *fratching*, onyhow," she remarked with cheerful emphasis as she received the appetising dishes from her colleague in the dark passage. "Lawks, she's pretty, isn't she? Perhaps she's one o' these 'ere actresses,—I've got a picture pocecard what I'm onmost sure is 'er." And she hurried off with a dish of asparagus.

Dinner over, the smiling proprietor came to receive their compliments. "A good train, sir? The nine-fifteen'll get you to Beighlington by ten. I've a bonny garden behind, and a dandy bowling green,—or the walk along the rampart road is very nice these warm nights. Thank you very much, sir, pleased to accommodate you and your pretty lady any time."

The lovers smiled and wandered off through the arches in the clipped yew hedges until they came to the velvet bowling green bordered by a great bed of carnations, tan and white and yellow and deep, dark crimson. Their rich scent set Valentine's pulses stirring madly again.

"Look behind you," he whispered, "—up there at the window with rose-pink curtains blowing out over that little grey balcony. Don't you wish, darling, that this was our wedding night, and that you were waiting for me there, behind those curtains, with the magic of these flowers wafting up to you? Would you tremble, Véronique, as you waited?—ah!" with intense passion threading his voice,—"you would not wait long, little sweetheart."

She was trembling then as she answered shakenly, "Oh, Valentine, I love you. I want your love, always, —always. But I cannot grieve my mother who loves

me, or deceive her when she trusts me. We must think of some way—that will not harm you."

He caught her to him,—and at the moment, they heard a discreet cough from the yew-hedge tunnel, and saw the portly figure of the proprietor approaching past the trimly-clipped peacocks and the stone urns filled with nasturtiums. The worthy man had disturbing news. There had been an accident near Hawes junction; the line was blocked and there was little prospect of trains getting through for some hours. "Now, there's a mort o' folk gone off for their holidays, but all the saame, there's a fair sprinkling up hereabouts from Beighlington and Leeds. So I thought I'd tell you I've a motor, afore it gets snapped up, what you can hire, as there bean't many has 'em i' Stepton. . . . Or you could stay here for t' night if so be at that's more convaynient like."

"Oh, the motor, please! I cannot possibly stay," said Veronica, sharply.

Chamier turned to the innkeeper. "We will let you know what we decide in a few minutes," he said.

"No, no!" exclaimed Veronica. "We have decided now. It is imperative for me to get back. Please, please have the motor got ready at once." And she set off towards the old courtyard, and Valentine had to follow.

"Nobody could blame you under the circumstances," he pleaded. "Won't you stay, Véronique?"

"I can't!—you know I can't," she said at last in desperation. "I do not feel—safe—with you to-night, somehow. I wish we were back in Beighlington. . . . I wish mother was at home,—oh, why don't they hurry?"

The car, driven by a red-faced man who talked to it as if he were grooming horses, encouraging its noisy exertions with a "Come oop, lass,—get ovver!" appeared at last, and Valentine and Veronica got in. She curled up close to Chamier, who, the last houses passed, placed his

arm about her and spoke tenderly. She turned darkened eyes to his.

"Something will happen," she whispered, fearfully. "I can feel it coming. . . . This is a ramshackle old thing, isn't it?"

"Oh," said Valentine, easily, "it will get us back all right. . . . But, oh, Véronique, my love,—you will never know how I was tempted to keep you there tonight! Tell me, now that we are homeward bound,—you wanted to stay, too,—in that little grey-balconied room, with the casement windows, and the roses nodding against it?"

"I know just what it was like inside," she whispered, her pulses throbbing as she dallied on the delicious, dangerous topic. "It had white walls, and two chairs covered with striped chintz, and the washstand had pink mats on it——"

"And we could have leaned out on the balcony and seen that big moon flooding the carnation bed, so that the white flowers gleamed, but the red ones were all dewy and dark and secret, hiding their lovely heads, yet most prodigal of all in scattering their perfume."

She looked up at him with tenderness in her gaze.

"Some day we will go there again,—some day, when we *can* stay,—oh, Valentine!"

He crushed her hands in his. "You are mine, Véronique," came his half-savage whisper, "you must never give yourself to another!"

"I am all and wholly yours," she whispered in reply.

Then there was a long silence; Veronica was lightly clad, and he wrapped the warm rug about her and held her close. Once she spoke.

"Ellen will be getting anxious, but we shall be home by half-past ten,—long before my father gets back, I suppose?" she queried.

"Oh, yes, darling,—long before that."

She closed her eyes. The warm shelter of Valentine's

arms, the hot day, the storms of emotion that had swept her, the amorous scents of the inn garden, the cleaner one blowing over the moor that melted into the sky on their right, soothed her to a delicious drowsiness. She was jerked back to full consciousness by a grinding, tearing noise; the car swerved, slackened its not too terrific speed, lurched, stopped. They were on the long hill that runs down to the village of Krillick, and as Valentine sprang out, ten strokes boomed from the square church tower at the foot of the moon-illumined slope.

Veronica scrambled to her feet and Valentine lifted her out. The driver got down too, and stood helplessly by, fingering a fringe of whisker.

"What's wrong?" asked Chamier, irritably, for he felt Veronica's slight figure trembling beside him.

"Deng me if Ah knaw, sir! Amn't shover. Ah'm t' ostler by reights. Chap at unnerstands this 'ere machine's innards is off for t' Feest to Morecambe, an' maister thowt Ah'd mebbe manage, bein' as Ah've bin aht wi' 'im a few times, off and on." He smiled sheepishly and ingratiatingly at Veronica, and took another tuft of whisker under manual training.

"Let us not stay," whispered Veronica. "We must walk; it may be hours before he gets it to start again. . . . It's only five miles,—not more than three, if we go over the moor past the tarn."

"That's reight, miss, t' short cut 'ud be best; you knaw t' way, Ah reckon?—turn oop t' snicket bi Newbould's farm, and you'll come into t' moor rooad, and be at t' tarn wi' a gooid 'awf hour's walking. Ah'll goa dahn to t' Calf and Chequers an' fotch summan oop to leuk at this 'ere danged mangle," remarked the driver, cheerily. "Night, sir—'night, missie."

Chamier took Veronica's arm and turned impatiently away. A sigh, half relief, floated from her lips. He glanced at her questioning.

"I would rather have things happen, than wait for

them," she said, explanatorily. "I knew something was going to happen,—well, it has happened, and it is not serious. . . . But we must hurry; I must be home at all costs before my father gets back. He's more horrible than usual on Saturday,—especially Feast Saturday night. . . . Sometimes I wonder if he drinks. . . . And mother is in Newcastle, but Ellen will be waiting for me; it will be all right if we hurry."

The moonlight flooded the road with its white radiance as they hastily descended the hill.

CHAPTER IV

BEAUTIFUL, with a haunting charm of loneliness, the moor lay that night. It might have been the purple-carpeted, violet-curtained dancing-hall of the fairies, lit by the great lamp of the moon, festooned with the sequin braid of stars. Here and there, the brooks were seen slipping, swift as swallows, through their narrow glens. With a stern aloofness the trees clustered about the hidden tarn; a light wind touched them and they sang, and the heather and bracken rustled in ecstasy.

Walking rapidly, Veronica and Valentine pressed upward. They emerged from the rutted, bramble-fringed laneway on to the white moor road.

"I don't know this side of the moor very well, but there is the tarn behind those trees," said Veronica, pointing to the bent forms ahead, sharply etched against the luminous sky. "We should not be more than half-an-hour then in reaching home."

"This is your environment, Véronique," he said. "You are Diana of the Uplands now."

"I'll be Diana of the Crossways, directly," she said, laughing ruefully, "unless I see this path begin to turn towards the tarn very soon."

"Are you anxious, then? You are not sure if this is the path? We will leave it and strike to the right directly. There are no bogs about, I suppose?"

"Not here. On Bulkley moor there are lots; it was there that Sammy Golightly disappeared."

"Who was the euphoniously-named gentleman?"

"Sammy was a dancing master in Bulkley—a hundred—two hundred years ago. One night, coming home with his fiddle from a soirée, he, light-footed as Spring, outdistanced his more heavily-built companions, jeering at their sloth as he, buckled shoes gleaming and silk stockings shining in the moonlight like rapiers, threaded intricate steps the while he scraped his fiddle. Soon he came over the crest by Beighlington Gate, and began to drop down out of sight of his slower comrades. Suddenly, sitting on a rock in the blaze of the moon he saw a little lead-coloured figure, patiently drawing a bow made of the vein of a leaf across the cup of a toadstool stringed with a glittering spider's web. But the web was wet with dew and no sound could he win from it. So to Sammy quoth the little man, 'Now stay thy feet that I may lure a melody from thy fiddle that shall call my lost family home to me.' But Sammy replied, 'Not so; lest my comrades overtake me and come first to the Widow Sutcliffe's Halfway House, and slake their thirst ere I!' And he made to pass. But the little man's voice came wistfully, 'Suffer me to play but one short measure, and thy light feet shall still reach the goal first.' But Sammy smote at the little lead-coloured man with his bow, and brought him to his knees. Still he pleaded, 'Yield me but one brief note, and go thy way in peace.' But Sammy, by way of refusal, took the grey toadstool viol on the point of his shoe, and, pirouetting, sent it whirling over the heather. Then the little man, crying loudly, 'So shall thy light feet go lightly nevermore,' sprang over a boulder of rock. Then Sammy, in a fury, leapt after him to smite him again,—and in a moment felt the bog-land sucking him down, down,—and when his wine-fuddled comrades came up,—behold, nothing, but the tip of Sammy's bow above the quivering green of the marsh! But, to vouch for the truth of the story, the grass is still emerald green behind the rock by Beighlington Gate,

and a Sutcliffe still dispenses ale at the Halfway House," concluded Veronica, gaily.

Valentine looked at her appreciatively. "You are not troubled now, dear?"

"No, I always feel calmed by the moor. I love its splendid silence. . . . Now let us leave the path and try to reach the tarn from here."

They swerved to the right, only to find after a few minutes' walk, that their way was barred by a tumbling beck, that evidently ran down to the Krill from the tarn. The water was shallow, but the descent of the bank difficult in the moonlight.

"It is quite narrow; I shall get no more than a wetting if I slip. I will jump to that flat stone, then you must spring across to me, Véronique."

The ascent of the other bank was easier, but on reaching the tarn, they found that the détour had been considerable. It was now almost eleven. From this point the moor road was good and they swung along at a swift pace, Veronica increasingly hopeful that her father had been delayed by the late shopping exigencies of Feast Saturday.

Valentine broke a short spell of silence.

"I hate going back to houses and people. You have made me in tune with space and loneliness to-night, dear. How good it must have been to live and love in the morning of the empty world! . . . I have always had a great longing to be a pioneer,—to be first. How glorious first to cleave the pathless sea, first to mark with the discoverer's footstep some virgin land of snow, some glittering shore, some golden desert!"

Veronica, smiling, began to quote softly:—

> "'We know now, know it all, and small the good
> To you or me the tedious knowledge brings;
> But oh! if one might stand where Jason stood,
> And dream, as he, of regions strange and fair
> Beyond the wild white sea-birds' baths, or where
> The utmost albatross beats lonely wings!'"

"That is beautiful," he said. Then, with sudden, almost childish petulance. "Think of that,—and Beighlington!"

"Still, we need not think too much of Beighlington, and no limit is set to our land of dreams. . . . I think life is not so much what one seeks as what one sees,—less what one finds than what one feels. Could this,"—she waved her hand to the broad, hushed expanse,—"be more beautiful than it is, if no eye but your own and the wild hawk's had looked on its loneliness?"

He glanced at her fondly, whimsically. "There's a smaller, dearer region that I want for mine,—no eye but mine,—certainly not that of any bird of prey," he said, meaningly, holding her closely for a long moment before they turned from the yellow track into the moon-dappled leafiness of Burling Lane. . . .

They covered the last few yards at a rapid pace, and paused at the archway gate of the nursery garden. It was closed; when Valentine laid his hand upon the iron ring it did not yield. Veronica paled a little, then smiled up at him.

"Ellen has been nervous alone," she said, as though she were reassuring herself more than him. "Even if my father has returned and locked it,—she would not fail me,—she will come to open it." But her voice shook a little, and she felt suddenly cold.

Chamier rattled the twisted handle lightly, but there was no response.

"Can she have gone to sleep? Is there no other way of getting in?"

"No,—only this! . . . Try again, Valentine!" And she began to call restrainedly, yet urgently, "Ellen, Ellen!" darting quick glances down the road, diapered with moonbeams.

"This is the devil, darling," began Valentine, shaking the gate dutifully; but he could not keep a tiny tremor

of exultation from his voice. He had curbed the passion of those earlier hours, schooled desire to discipline. But now a wave that swept coolness like wreckage from the sands, surged up in him, and his heart pounded. As he shook the resisting gate, heard the girl's unanswered calls, a subtle and unholy satisfaction leapt to recognition. It was as though he had forborne to pluck some splendid, lovely flower, pushing temptation away with outstretched hands into which it had suddenly fallen, stainless and perfect, form and fragrance intact. He looked at Veronica standing wide-eyed and suddenly still beside him. She flung her hands out towards him,—and swiftly he drew her into the fold of his arm. Her head drooped to his shoulder; her body in the thin white dress, veiled only by a light silk wrap, was trembling. As they clung there in silence, a laugh grated through the sweet stillness. They sprang apart, their hands unlinked, their eyes flashed upward. There, leaning from the high window of the billiard-room over the arch, George Quening's face, diabolical in the rain of moonlight, leered down upon them.

"That you knockin', Ronniker?" came the harsh voice, cruelly deliberate.

"You know it is," fiercely. "Let me in!"

"Nay, nay, not so fast. We mun 'ev a bit of an explanation, first, my lass. . . . This'll be your new feller, I reckon?"

Veronica turned to Chamier. She was marble-pale, but afraid no longer.

"Go, Valentine," she whispered. "Leave me, it will be better. He will let me in then."

For answer Valentine flung the scorn of his glance towards the venomous face that hung above them.

"You are a beastly, low cad," he said, hoarsely. "Come down, damn you, and unlock this gate!" He spoke as to a servant with indescribable arrogance.

"Oh, ho! The puppy can bark, can it? Well tha

can't bite from theer, my lad, so it seems to me Ah've gotten thee at a disadvantage."

To Veronica, listening intently, came another sound. It was Ellen crying at the house door.

"Oh, miss, oh, miss," she was wailing. "'E's gone mad, I do believe,—I daresn't stop wi' 'im."

"Can't you get the key?"

"No, 'e's got it, miss, oh laws, oh laws!"

Chamier measured the gate with his eye. It was a handsome, high, wrought-iron affair, running up to the spring of the arch. It would be difficult for him,—impossible for Veronica to climb, and the space between its topmost tarnished gold spikes and the roof of the arch was disquietingly small. And even if he managed to scale it, of what avail would it be when Quening would undoubtedly refuse to relinquish the key? He shook his head perplexedly, while the nurseryman watched him, smiling sardonically.

"Tha's done reight to give it up, lad. Ah'd 'a pawsed thee back quicker than tha' could get up ageean."

Chamier gazed at him furiously.

"I am going to find a policeman," he said, slowly, "and compel you to open the gate for your daughter."

"Nay, lad, Ah'm feelin' varry tired. Ah'm a'feared Ah'd be too fast asleep bi t' time tha' got back, to hear awther thee or a bobby."

Filled with unutterable repulsion, Chamier turned to the girl.

"I am going to leave you a moment," he whispered. "I'm going to find a stone and come back and—fling it at that unspeakable beast, if I kill him. Perhaps I can manage to knock him senseless, and climb the gate and let you in."

"No, no, you could not leave me with him."

"You could sleep with your maid,—or I would lock him up. If it came to a fight I could damage him somewhat, you know."

"No, no, Valentine,—you might kill him. . . . Oh, how awful that would be!"

"By God, he deserves shooting!"

"Come away, Valentine!" Veronica spoke loudly, exultantly. "I can go to Jennie, of course. It isn't very late,—not yet twelve. Why do we stand here arguing—pleading—with that—animal?"

He took her hand and they turned away together. Quening's mocking laugh followed them.

"Please yersen, Ronnicker," he shouted coarsely. "It's a goodish step to St. Anne's-bi-Sea,—'appen through 'alifax an' Preston would be your nearest way."

Veronica clasped her companion's hand tightly.

"It is quite true," she said, dazedly, "I had forgotten. . . . Jennie has gone away for her holidays . . . they are all gone, the house is empty." A look of terror crept into her eyes. "It is Parish Feast . . . almost everyone will be away. . . . Brian. . . ."

"You couldn't go to him, darling."

"No, of course not. . . . And my stepmother is away,—I don't even know where exactly. She has been in Newcastle nursing her niece,—but I believe she was to take her to the seaside this week. . . . She halted suddenly. "Mrs. Appleyard . . . I don't think they will be away." She began to cry in sudden relief. "I will try there." She hurried forward.

"Where does she live?" Valentine asked sombrely.

"Oh, a long way,—nearly two miles along the Stepton Road,—a good distance beyond Moss Grange. . . . Perhaps we can get a cab." She leaned heavily against him.

"You feel faint, darling?"

"Yes . . . a little! And deadly cold!"

He swore softly, and braced himself rigidly.

"First of all you must come home . . . with me . . . for a moment . . . and have some wine. You are worn out. Now, lean on me, dearest, we can reach

my place in a few minutes . . . and you can rest."

His tone was vibrant, authoritative. Veronica felt his arm about her, sustaining her, and she stumbled forward weakly. . . .

In the small square hall of Moss Grange, a light was burning, and as they entered, Valentine's servant stepped alertly towards them.

Chamier, supporting the girl, went on swiftly into a low-pitched room on the right. It was full of the scent of roses; there were great bunches of them, scarlet and crimson, in the deep blue Chinese bowls that dotted several black oak tables. It was more a woman's room than a man's; a miniature grand piano blocked one corner; in another, a small table held sandwiches and wine.

Valentine came and knelt before her drooping on a couch. There was a glass in his hand and he spoke tenderly. She took it from him, shuddered, drank. Her face was deadly pale, and deep shadows lay beneath her eyes.

"I must go in a moment," she whispered.

"You must rest first. . . . Give me the address of your friends and I will send Hyles." He touched the bell and waited.

"You will go, Hyles, to this address; Mrs. Appleyard, at 1, Hedon Crescent; you know the houses standing back from the road a little way past the cemetery. . . . Knock her up if necessary, and tell her there has been an accident, and ask her to receive Miss Quening,—do not forget the name,—for the night. Return quickly and bring her reply. If you see a cab, take it, of course." He looked at his servant. His unflickering blue eyes held the man's brown ones, close-set and servile. Speaking very swiftly, he added a few words in a strange, uncouth language,—a remnant of the Kaffir tongue, familiar from their days in Africa. The man saluted and disappeared.

Valentine shook his shoulders as though casting inde-

cision aside, and stooped over Veronica. She felt very drowsy; the scent of the flowers, the strong wine after the long, rough walk over the moor, and the exhaustion of that impotent struggle,—the last, she vowed, bitterly, —with her unnatural parent,—overcame her. She had been scarcely cognisant of the colloquy between master and man. . . .

"You must rouse yourself, dearest, and eat something. See, here are sandwiches and fruit."

She obeyed wearily, examining the room with lustreless eyes. It seemed cramped, almost stifling. She did not wonder that Valentine slept badly, dreamt evilly, in such a house. Suddenly, she remembered a story she had heard of a woman, a Frenchwoman, questing for a house, who, on entering one that had seemed likely to suit, exclaimed, shuddering, "There is a miasma in the hall!" Somehow, this room was reminiscent of those vivid pictures Valentine had drawn for her of the Amazon forests,—the wall-paper had a crushed and tangled look, the carpet was too thick, fatiguingly thick and heavy. There were twisted brasses in the fireplace, they looked like writhing pythons, the tall lamps shone like baleful flowers above their exuberant, interlacing stems. The low ceiling was tinted deeply blue, a veritable tropic sky. It seemed to press down on her brow, yet she shivered as with cold. She closed her eyes as though they were dazzled, and lay very still. The time passed; the clock chimed once, silverly, the half hour after midnight. . . . At last, half-unconsciously, she heard the servant's precise, soldierly step returning. . . .

Veronica pulled herself together and glanced at the man. He had not a bad face, though his eyes were set too closely together, and had a leathery look. Valentine was standing behind her, his hand on her shoulder.

"Well?" he queried, nervously.

"All gone away, sir, this afternoon."

"How do you know?" Veronica spoke as though she

were spent with running. The man turned his face to her, and it seemed as if a tinge of red coloured his sallow cheek.

"I knocked and rang, miss, and got no answer. Then a policeman came along, and told me the family went away this afternoon. The servant had told him to keep an eye on the place during their absence, as she was going home."

"The servant?" A little hissing sound from Valentine's lips reached her ear, dully, and for a moment it seemed that she caught the flash of a sinister glance as it sped from the man's to the master's eye. . . . But she was too tired to trace its meaning. Her brain felt buffeted, beaten, numbed. . . . "Oh," she whispered, shakily, "they have no servant. It must have been the charwoman, I suppose."

"That is all, Hyles," came Valentine's voice like ice. The man's figure dissolved from the picture.

Chamier leaned over her couch.

"Véronique, Véronique," he murmured, kissing her hair. "Don't fight any longer; stay with me, little beloved one. Kismet! It is written. My love, my life are yours,—in these small, tired hands I lay them with the homage that shall not fail you. . . . Ah, I would be more than human if I could let you go now; and indeed, I am very man when I think of your helpless sweetness. Your lips you have given me, and they have sworn your love. To-night, darling, is meant to be ours,—the first of love as I will teach it to you,—our marriage night. . . . No, do not turn from me, my love,—I know you care for me. You believe in Destiny,—the power that bears us along the stream, struggle as we will! Do you not see it all this day, driving us into each other's arms?—our isolation in the wood, the contretemps to the trains, the accident to the motor, your father's conduct,—and, finally, your—friends' absence. All we have resisted, all,—until now . . . now . . . when we will fight no longer

against what Fate has in store for us." His voice dropped to a lower note, and with mesmeric touch, his hand began to move softly and rhythmically over the curve of her cheek and neck. "Ah, Véronique, my darling, I swear you shall find it very sweet."

She moved with a little trusting gesture, but she did not speak.

"Look at me, dear! Give me your mouth again to kiss. You are cold, trembling . . . let me hold you closer still. . . . Say you do not blame me, sweet! You know I did my best to make that devil—is he really your father?—give way. I tried to send you from me, meant to let you go then. But now, surely Fate and Circumstance have made you mine." His voice was triumphant. "Ah, you cling to Convention, even in this, our hour. It is natural, of course. You have been narrowly brought up,—but, oh, Véronique, there are wide worlds for us to wander in together where Convention holds no sway. You shall go away from here with me—for ever,—and who is going to care in a little while under what circumstances you went? And little we shall care, roaming the world together! . . . Already we belong to each other. And what else is there for you to do?—you cannot go back to that madman."

She shuddered violently.

"Never!"

"Then what is left for you, darling? Do not think me brutal? I want only to show you your position." The faint colour was stealing back to her cheeks; along her deadened pulses life was thudding again. It was very restful in her lover's arms; she felt as if her body, that had been so heavy and drooping, were suddenly light as a curtseying cloud floating across the sky. A smile touched her lips with infinite sweetness. Surrender was very near.

"Valentine!" she whispered.

The blood beat in his temples; his heart hammered. He

buried his hot face in her hair,—at that moment he could not meet her eyes; his own stung as if they were filled with blood.

"You will be safe, everything utterly secret here," he stammered. "Stay to-night,—to-morrow,—and on Monday I will take you away. I will find a fitting bower for my rose. I know a tiny village in Devon, all russet red and royal blue and gold. God, Véronique, we could be happy there!—and none the wiser. I could come often to you, even though I still kept up a pretence of being at the works here. . . . Or perhaps you would like London better,—a flat of your very own where you could do exactly as you wish. I want only to please you, that shall be my single aim. You shall have all I can give you,—and, later, when my uncle dies, all that anyone could give you, the highest in the land, though not a jot more than you deserve. . . ." An inner light seemed to dawn in the beauty of her face. Here was Love, the giver. Should she not be generous too? Hesitancy vanished. Pride remained, but pride softened into something exquisite and pure. The golden moment of life broke upon her then, as she lay there passive, her lover's face close against her own.

"I don't want anything," she whispered,—"but you." Her arm tightened about him. Now that she had come to her decision she felt strangely at ease. All her perplexities, hesitations, faint stirrings of mistrust fell from her. They were alone together in a little tropic grove of beauty. The air of the room seemed no longer of overpowering weight, only of a strange drowsy sweetness. Through half-closed eyes she saw the rosy colours flooding the space of floor beneath the lighted lamp, the soft black shadows hanging in the corners. Valentine was quiescent beside her, pleading over. She felt that he was aware of victory. Later, she could explain everything to her mother,—to Jennie,—but that was for the future. The moment was theirs alone, full of enchant-

ment. Yet the vague thought of her stepmother had called up a picture of a wistful, anxious face. She seemed in a dim way to feel as though she were on the stage in a strange dream, wherein she realised she had entirely forgotten the next words she had to say, yet curiously unmoved that it should be so. And in the wings her mother stood with frantically-moving lips, striving to give her the cue. She smiled languidly. Had she, for a moment, fallen asleep? She stirred slightly in the encircling arm, and began to speak, certain of her lover's acquiescence. She was giving so much, asking so little. Her words seemed to disregard the long pause that had fallen since last the silence was broken.

"Or if I do, it is so small a thing,—only that after Monday,—when we are—married, Valentine,—you will let me write to my stepmother,—she will be anxious,—and tell her how my father's action forced us to this secrecy,—tell her"—the soft voice dropped lower—"how happy I am to be your wife."

What was there in the pregnant silence that ensued that struck a chill to her heart? It was brief, so brief that a kiss, a few breaths drawn, could have filled it,—yet it was strangely, agonisingly long. And its effect was such as a sudden plunge into icy water might have been. Magically, the slumbrous air was vitalised. It wrapped her in somnolence no longer. She felt along her veins the tingling sensation, the brilliantly-alive glow of skin and muscles that was hers when the moor air struck her. She saw him clearly, incredibly clearly, sheer down to the dark thoughts that coiled black and poisonous as snakes under the fair tree of his outward seeming. She held her breath, and something that was half a prayer for strength winged from her. . . . He did not mean to marry her,—perhaps had never meant it,—only to possess her! . . . She was trapped. To her mind rose a picture, torturing, maddening picture of the moorman and the prisoned bird. It went free

for a while at least across the vivid blue . . . . but the girl,—no freedom again for her for ever. . . . Trapped! She, Veronica, who had been so proud! She thought of Guy who had offered her so much,—of Brian who would have laid all at her feet,—even of Max who loved her at least with a love that had no design to smirch. She lay perfectly motionless, her arm still curled about Valentine's shoulder. He had not dreamt, must not guess of the sudden horror and loathing that had been born in her. . . . Veronica Quening . . . Laura Pusey . . . the syllables battered on her weary brain. The tainted flat that he offered, the Devonshire cottage where he would hide her. . . . Ah, that love died with so much pain!

Then, at last, he spoke, his lips still pressed against her hair; but to her, now, his words were freighted with sinister double meaning.

"Yes, darling, you must tell your stepmother the news when we are married, certainly."

All at once she was calm,—mistress of herself;—never of him, she vowed silently and stubbornly. She drew his head closer to her face, leaned her cheek on his, and answered him softly, returning the shower of caresses. A metallic voice in her heart seemed to remind her that he admired her powers of acting. So be it, she thought, with a strange, cruel satisfaction. Now the hour was come to play her best part.

"Now, you must not be a foolish child again," he breathed amid his endearments. "You are quite safe, quite secure here. No one is going to know anything about it."

"The woman who cooks for you,—where is she?"

"Not here, dear, until Monday. Like everyone else in Beighlington, a slave to the ubiquitous holiday!" His voice dropped lower. "Decide, Véronique, my sweet—my sweet! I have been very patient; do not keep me waiting too long."

"I have decided, Valentine. But you can understand that this is—rather—dreadful—to me. Be patient with me." She broke gently from his arm, and looked at him shyly, adorably, beneath the upcurled eyelashes. Her cheeks were flushed with rose, there was abandon in the way she leaned back from his embrace,—withholding yet granting in every passionate glance of adoration.

"One moment, Valentine! Where is Hyles?"

"In bed long ago, dear." Then, impatiently, "Ah, do not hesitate any longer, you must see I am mad—mad—for you, my love!"

"I must be certain that nobody knows I am here, Valentine. Your man,—I am not sure if I trust him,—you must see that he has really gone to bed."

"Very well. Though I assure you he knows better than to spy on me." He looked at her, half-protesting, possessed by his strong excitement. But he straightened himself, and, with a shrug of his shoulders, turned towards the door.

"I am very thirsty, Valentine." He wheeled again instantly.

"Here is wine, dear."

"No,—I do not care for it. Can you get me a glass of water, Valentine?"

He threw her a look of suspicion, instantly dispelled as he saw the slight figure drooping on the couch. Her eyes were blurred with tears, her listless hands hung heavily on the brocade of the divan. Energy seemed to have died in her. He looked at her, anxiety and triumph warring in his glance.

"Please go," came her faint whisper.

"Dare I leave you? Are you well enough?"

"Yes, quite well,—but so tired." She nestled deeper into the soft cushions and closed her eyes. The door opened, and very gently closed.

Some instinct bade her remain motionless. That it was a true one she knew when, through the shadow of

her hair she saw the door swing noiselessly open once more, and so for a second stay. Not a tremor shook the passivity of her figure. Tension hung for a moment, almost palpable. Then the door fell again soundlessly into place.

She was alone. She started violently from the couch. Round the room her wide glance went. There was only one door, by which Valentine had just disappeared. The windows were shrouded with satin curtains of a rich, dim blue. She sped silently across the room, slipped the heavy catch of the long French window—after a moment's icy fear that it was too firm to yield to her puny strength,—and sprang out of the opening to the shallow steps beneath. . . . A shadow slipped from the portico, and revealed itself as a man. . . . Hyles? . . . A hand smothered the scream that rose to her lips, a guttural voice began to speak hoarsely, reassuringly. . . . She was clinging to the arm of Max Linders, and running madly, swiftly down the shrub-lined drive, and out, breathless, free, on the broad, deserted Stepton Road.

"Max, Max,—oh, you have saved me! How was it?—how came you there? . . . No, no, don't answer, come quickly, quickly . . . keep in the shadow of the wall,—or, hurry, Max hurry!" She was sobbing wildly, yet not for a moment slackening her rapid flight. Her companion flung an arm round her, and they ran on, abreast.

"Max, Max, I am never going home again. . . . Straight on," she panted.

"Stop, Vera! No one can overtake us now. You must explain. Why are you not going home? Why are you so agitated? That man,—Chamier,—what has he done to you?" fiercely.

"Nothing, nothing! I have run away from him,—I was afraid,—my father locked me out,—he took me to his house,—just for a few minutes he said, until he sent his man to Mrs. Appleyard to ask her to take me in."

"Yes?"

"She,—she is away,—the house was locked up."

There was a long pause, in which it seemed that the trees ceased their rustling, and listened, listened.

"So!" answered the German on a long sibilant breath.

"But you, Max? Where had you been? Why were you there? Oh, how you frightened me,—yet how glad I am to find you,——how glad, Max, how thankful!"

He squeezed her hand, and spoke rapidly, his agitation swiftly apparent in his speech. "I have at the house of Floyd, the Musik-direktor, been."

For the first time she saw that his violin case swung from his hand. "I stayed late, practising, and was homeward walking when—I saw a man in front of me. He turned in at that gate, and I was on my way proceeding when, caught on a bush at the entrance to the drive,—I noticed—this." He drew from his pocket a filmy, silken scarf of blue and silver stripes. "It is the one Appleyard painted you wearing,—the one I brought you from Berlin last year."

She nodded in silence. The deadly weariness was creeping over her again.

"I went on after the man,—he entered the house and I crept up beside the window, where I saw a faint light. I," he made an expressive gesture,—"I did not know what to do. I waited. I could hear nothing . . . it seeemd a long time. I thought I would go away,—then you came rushing out, into my arms."

"Oh, I thought it was Hyles, the servant!" Then, over her like a flood, came the thought of Valentine's baseness,—shame scorched and stung her brow and throat. "What shall I do, Max?" she asked, wistfully.

"Will you marry me, Vera?"

"Marry you!"

"Yes. You know how I love you,—ja wohl,—for nearly ten years have I loved you. . . . We can go to London

to-night and be married on Monday." She started violently. "See, here we are at my rooms. You are tired, but you must not come in. I am going to get you a cloak, and a bag,—wait for a few small minutes only, little weary one, and in the train you shall rest."

Was it only a few short hours ago that the smiling man at the inn had come to tell them, sitting in the sweet hush amid the carnations, in the walled garden that was like a box of gems, that there were no trains? Or was that days ago? She did not know, she only knew that she must sleep,—soon, soon. Her thoughts were whirling like birds,—it did not matter, she could not remember. She leaned against the rusty railings and a deathly sickness broke over her. Cold beads stood on her brow, her hands were burning, and a red-hot needle pierced her temples. The moonlight fell on the crushed whiteness of her dress, her disordered hair, her lovely, stricken face. Suddenly she remembered that she had no hat,—*he* had removed it, so tenderly, so deftly,—and it lay on the carpet that had seemed to clog her feet with its sumptuous thickness. Panic seized her again, sheer and unreasoning. Then,—Max was beside her, wrapping her in a coat, a dreadful, cheap mackintosh,—she smelt its damp, sickly odour.

"Here is a hat, dear,—the things are Mrs. Brigg's,—they are the best I could find." He spoke humbly, adoringly. She tried to smile, smoothing the dusty black ribbons of the hard straw hat.

"Listen! Ein Droschke!"

Along the quiet road, returning from the station, came a belated cab. Max hailed the sleepy driver, spoke to him urgently; lifted the girl into the musty vehicle, leapt in after her.

"The line is clear," he said. "There was a slight accident higher up,—the trains are running now,—cry, then, armer Vera, mein liebling,—there, on my heart."

When Brian Courage took up his duties again after a holiday that was as the taste of ashes in his mouth, Veronica Quening had been for four weeks the wife of Max Linders.

CHAPTER V

POPPLEWELL STREET trails its gaunt length upward from Caven Street, looking like a cumbrous, shabby train that has fallen upon evil times in an unfrequented siding. The engine, represented by a bleak church on the distant height, turns a cold eye from its tower on the serpentine coil below it, and seems to frown indifferently upon the chaos it has wrought in its failure to drag the heavy load further up the persistent rise; glancing, so it impresses the onlooker, with distaste at the tumbled heaps that have lapsed into shapelessness in its rear. These detached, though narrowly separated bundles, call themselves Terraces and Avenues and Crescents and Mounts. Where one almost expects an enlightening board,—"Slow Train, Leeds and Intervening Stations," one reads instead, Popplewell Mount, Leonard Terrace, Clock View Avenue,—the last flight rendered mildly appropriate in that the row has acquired a permanent crick in the neck, and a consequent inclination to slew round towards the clock tower of New Jerusalem Church.

There are five bloated compartments in the carriage that is Popplewell Mount, and Max deemed himself fortunate in securing the lowest one, luckily vacant on their return from London. It was cheap, small,—he weighed this as an advantage in its saving of furniture,—and but ten minutes' walk from Swire Mills. This house, Number One, is uncoupled from the top one in Leonard Terrace, though only by a darksome passage that leads to yards in the rear; a passage that lends further colour to the train illusion, being for ever a-swarm with raucous-voiced cats, whose appalling cries seem to suggest the

harsh screams of engines hurling themselves into the gloomy bowels of death-dealing tunnels.

The gardens, too, are pathetic strips, reminiscent of the half-cultivated bits of embankment one occasionally glimpses from a passing train, and are likewise littered by bits of broken bottles and rings from preserved-meat tins, such as a certain type of traveller has difficulty in restraining himself from shying at the bent growths he views from his smutty, sliding window.

On an afternoon in mid-September, when even to think of the creepers ablaze on the grey old walls of Sinodun made a sudden gleam suffuse the drab houses of the opposite terrace, with their rheumatic railings and grief-stricken geraniums, Veronica sat somewhat listlessly in the front room of Number One, Popplewell Mount, and waited for the return of her husband from business. That he would be later than usual she knew, for he intended to make a final call at the house of Mrs. Brigg, his former landlady, and bring thence the remnants of his wardrobe, and the odds and ends collected during his bachelor years.

The room in which she sat, book in hand, was as yet comparatively bare, and, except in its mean proportions, its ill-fitting, badly-painted door, its screaming fireplace with brawn-like mantel and brilliant and unescapable blue tiles on which fat red roses sprawled,—not entirely ugly. The carpet,—Max had asserted loudly that lino. was the best wear, and had given in with a bad grace,—was a plain brown felt. The walls were hung, evidently by one who possessed the evil eye, with a white paper striped in silver. A few damp patches, like strips of melting chocolate, had already appeared against the passage wall. Only three pictures were to be seen, lovely bits of moorland, signed by Bannister Appleyard, and to them, Veronica's eyes turned often. There were two stuffed-over chairs, and a Chesterfield, on the pale-tinted cushions of which could be seen the dingy, early evidence of the spot where Linders' head had lain during Sunday's

long and heavy siesta, "announcing workday done and wages pouched, and liberty obtained to sleep, nay, snore. . . ." A good upright piano slanted across a corner near the fireplace. The Terrace and Mount and Avenue had been pleasantly stirred a fortnight previously by the appearance of Sir Shem's small, alert figure in their midst. He had disappeared from neighbourly eyes, if not from interest, by the opening of the door of Number One.

Veronica had turned a little pale at the sight of him. What did he think of this sudden marital escapade on the part of his clerk? His pleasant quizzical glance reassured her.

"So you are married, little lady?"

"Yes, Sir Shem," she answered shyly.

"Well, Linders is over the moon, and small wonder; he's a lucky fellow," looking at her admiringly, as she stood, exquisitely young and appealing, beside him. "Now, let's see your house. I must look in my stocking and find something to make it pretty, eh? . . . Hardly thought my little prizewinner would be my clerk's—my German clerk's wife some day . . . I thought the little lady would look a bit higher, what? That handsome fellow that made eyes at you in the play, now,—but there! 'the little laughing god of love' as the song says! . . . Still, were there no Englishmen, lassie?"

"I thought you liked Germans, Sir Shem?"

"Well, I've a notion they're going to play a big part in the world's map-drawing competition one day. . . . And I'm not of those who refuse to grant them brains,—of a certain sort," answered the knight, taking quick steps about the unarranged room.

"But not the sort of brains you would like, Sir Shem?" suggested Veronica, shrewdly.

"Well, well, now, I don't know about that. A very useful kind, I daresay, my dear, to those not bothered with hearts, especially," with a twinkle.

"No use to you then, Sir Shem!"

He laughed.

"That's true, Veronica, for I've got three hearts, I think, sometimes. One in my throat, when I see injustice or cruelty, and one in my boots when I start to address a public meeting,—and the third in the accustomed spot, beating very kindly for you and other young wives, setting out so bravely to meet—well, well, what about a piano?"

"A piano?"

"Not got one yet?"

"Oh, no!"

"Well, Linders shall come with me to Bradford tomorrow and pick out a pretty little instrument. I fancy he'll be able to wheedle a few tunes out of it, eh?"

"Oh! . . . Max plays beautifully, of course."

"And folks tell me that Mrs. Max can sang a bit too! . . . Now, now, my dear, that's all right! A pleasure to a lonely old bachelor!"

So there the piano stood; on it, Max's violin case lay; and a chintz-covered box on the floor held music.

Veronica laid her book on the polished table, bare now, miraculously covered at Jennie's frequent approaches, with one of her belated wedding gifts,—a "drawn" cloth on which attenuated fuchsias had been conscientiously, if uninspiredly, embroidered. As she did so, the flimsy gate was flung open eagerly, and Max's step was audible on the flagged path of the garden. The gate swung, and Veronica stiffened into rigidity. But only for a moment. Then she gave a faint sigh, caught up a smile from the depths, and fastened it resolutely to her mouth. Could Valentine have seen it then, robbed of the delicious spontaneity with which so often he had seen it flicker into lovely being, the small dimple lying beside it like a warm, exquisite shadow, tremulously sensitive,—he might well have smitten his hands and closed his eyes in sorrow at the havoc he had wrought. She glanced round the room

for a hunted moment, rested her eyes on the piece of painted moorland, slipped the book she had been reading under a loose cushion, and stepped out into the narrow hall, from which sprang horrifically the sheer staircase, shinily oilclothed, barred by the pinchbeck, brass-veneered rods. For one choking instant, she saw again the gracious curve of the darkly-gleaming stair of Swarthe . . . then Max had dropped the bags he was carrying, hung his last year's straw hat on a peg where Veronica could glimpse nauseatingly the sweat-darkened leather band of its interior, wiped his forehead, pushing back the thick-springing hair, and taken her in his arms. The heat of his black coat burned through the thin white blouse she wore, and his kisses left marks like bruises on the delicate texture of her neck.

"Tea ready?" he asked at last.

She disengaged herself and nodded.

"The kettle's boiling; I will make it while you wash."

"Right!" He lifted the bags with a brusque movement, and disappeared. Veronica listened intently; but no sound of sluicing came from the tiny bathroom, and when Max reappeared, he was in his shirt sleeves, and the inkstains still discoloured his middle finger. She glanced at his hands, shrugged her shoulders, and sat down at the tray. He jerked the window shut, pulled a chair up noisily, and smiled at her fondly.

"Well, what have you been doing to-day, little one?"

Veronica began to pour the tea. It made a pleasant tinkling sound that soothed her, and there were dahlias on the tablecloth, great rich, dark beauties slumbrous Creoles, she thought. She laid her fingers on their velvety rose-madder petals and answered him smilingly.

"I went along Silver Street; it was very warm."

Max held a spoon and fork above the glass dish before him.

"Did you get this salmon there?" he asked, plunging

the servers into the bowl, and dropping bits of fish and garnishing of feathery parsley fronds on the lace-edged cloth.

"Yes."

"Burton and Baggs?"

"Yes. Here's your tea, Max."

"Thanks. . . . How much?"

"What? . . . Oh, the salmon? . . . Tenpence halfpenny, I believe. I'm not sure."

"Not sure?"

"I can't remember. I got some other things," answered Veronica, impatiently.

"Still, you must surely have noticed. . . . You must be careful now that you are a little Hausfrau, dear. . . . I'll go in and ask to-morrow."

"Oh, Max,—no!"

"Oh, Vera,—yes! Because," impressively, "I know for a fact it is only ninepence a tin at Broster's in Park Street."

"But I hate Park Street."

"What does that matter? . . . In Germany, my aunt would walk a mile so that she had saved a pfennig. . . . Where are you going?"

Veronica had sprung impulsively to her feet. She turned her flushed face and sparkling eyes towards him. Her foot beat the floor and her hands clenched themselves. He stared at her in good-natured bewilderment, his splendid eyes questioning under the wave of too-seldom washed hair that fell across his brow. . . . Suddenly her anger faded. She smiled slowly, wistfully, maternally. . . . After all, he was her husband, he loved her. . . . had saved her. Perhaps these petty, these incredibly petty ways were part of his German heritage. Well, she could brook them since his birth had given him, too, that nobler gift of wild and throbbing music, that upheld her struggling spirit on its vast and soaring wings. . . . She went quickly round the table and stooped

over his chair, dropping a light kiss on his forehead.

"Only to cut some more bread and butter," she said, quietly, lifting the almost empty, blue bordered plate.

"Better wait and see if we need any more," he suggested, pulling her with a swift, strong movement to his knee. "I like you in this thin dress," he whispered, pushing the loose sleeve up over her white forearm. "Oh, Vera,—Vera,—married, and in our own house,—are we not lucky—and happy—my wife?"

And in the glow of his kisses and ardour of his embrace, she forgot her irritation, and leaned against him contentedly.

But afterwards, unrest seized her again as she sat alone in the sitting-room while Max wrote one of his infrequent letters to the old Tante Hildegarde who had stood to him in the place of parents since the time that he was eight years old, and who kept a lodging-house for better class workmen in quaint old-world Lubeck, and in the small shop fronting her house sold mid-morning snacks,—buns, bouillon, brioches, with a cup of coffee or a small glass of execrable wine,—all for the sum of fivepence. His early education and proficiency in the crude wool-work that had hopelessly biased his taste, had been acquired in the old-fashioned Volkschule, and his journeyings to and from it undertaken in the company of his stiffly-garbed elder cousins, Gertrud and Wanda, who indulged in a sentimentally-laughable Schwarmerei for the light-haired and heavy-footed teacher, Fraülein Hoppe. . . . He wrote quickly, laughing sometimes as he recalled their exasperating stolidity. What would they think of his wife, his Vera? "She is like a flame," he thought hotly, closing his letter in the customary dutiful German style. "They would understand her better if she were a block of wood, instead," contemptuously, for he had the fatuous belief that his young wife was to him wholly comprehensible.

In the sitting-room, Veronica sat and wondered. Life

had suddenly become complex, mystifying. Her thoughts went perilously back to that last day with Valentine,—the day that was to have held the hours linked like jewelled medallions . . . when they had dreamed among the carnations, when their feet had stirred the heather, free, elastic, when she had listened to his whispered desire. No! of that she had vowed nevermore to think! . . . She felt again the intolerable weariness that had clouded her brain as she hastened with Max, frantic to escape, through the night. She mused over that interminable journey to London, that sickening arrival on a dusty, early morning in an arid, fearsome city, the long, disheartening search for rooms, sordid, dirty—worse, she had surmised since, than merely dirty. Then the delay of days, meals eaten in cheap chop-houses, teas partaken of in crowded A B Cs,—nights when she had listened to Linders' heavy breathing through the thin partition that had divided their airless rooms,—until at last they were married, incredibly, irrevocably linked for life by a snuffy old person—"slimy,"—Veronica's memory supplied the word subconsciously, as the pictures,—drab, drab, smote her. . . . Then, to her mind came again the remembrance of their return to Beighlington, herself pale and resolute, with the new gold band about her finger; the welcome given them by Mrs. Dixon and Jennie, apprised a few days previously of the astonishing event,—Jennie with resignation and heartbreak and love,—oh, above all, love!—in her brown eyes; of the soft warm tears of her stepmother, reproaching herself,—never Veronica,—for the hasty marriage that had been the outcome of her husband's terrible callousness. (Veronica had sworn Max to secrecy as to the part that Chamier had played in the game in which he himself had held the winning card). "I thought you'd left off caring for Max, dearie," Mrs. Quening had said over and over again. "But there,—you've known him a-many years . . . the other was likely but a passing fancy," how she had shivered at the words,—"it's more comfortable

wedding in your own class; and you'll be near me now,—he'd ha' taken you away, likely. . . ." And Mrs. Dixon, bustling about the kitchen preparing tea for the travellers, had nodded approval, regardless of Jennie's anguished eyes, "He's a varry likely young feller," she said, removing the pink slices of boiled ham from the reach of seven-year-old Bessie, "and I shouldn't wonder if he's addling his five pound a week afore he finishes. . . . All the same, we was fairly knocked silly w'en t' letter comed from London. ''Ere's a letter i' Ronnie's writing,' says I, surprised-like, for it was addressed to me, and we'd never nobbut had a poce-card from her usually on her holidays, all t' letters being for our Jennie here. Well, as I say, you could ha' blown me and father over wi' a whiff when we read 'at Ronnie was wed. . . . But come, draw yer chairs up,—tea's drawn already," with a pleasant laugh. "And let's wish Max and Ronnie 'ealth and 'appiness." . . . Veronica's eyes softened as she recalled the welcome,—a real Herzliche Wilkommen, Max had approvingly named it (never so foreign-seeming as on that day), that the simple, kindly family had bestowed upon them. . . . Then her head drooped lower as a few words that Mr. Dixon had spoken one evening when they were alone, came back to her memory. She had brought him his old carpet slippers, and had knelt on the rug beside him. She had always liked this man of rare speech and long, smoke-filled silences. He had placed his hard discoloured hand suddenly on her bent head. "Ronnie," he had said, taking the pipe from his mouth, and speaking slowly and tenderly, "Ronnie, lass, we had a bit o' blew stuff at miln, once, 'at got a thread o' pink running through it bi some mistek or other, and leuked like to be a spoilt length. But just as we wor puttin' it aside wi' some other damaged ends, designer 'appened along, and, leuking at it, says, 'By Gum, that theer pink goes bonny wi' that theer blew,' an' he goes off an' maks a pattern o' blew wi' little pink flecks in it wot wor one o' t' best sellers we'd ivver 'ad.

. . . Ronnie, lass, mak yer faailure into a success, my dear,—put some flecks of yer awn sweetness into it, and you'll get a gradely length yet, Ah'll be bound." He had smiled at her, a slow and thoughtful smile, and she had caught his hand and pressed it while a few hot tears fell on its hairy surface. She shook her shoulders now, and lifted her head on the recollection.

"Yes, I can make my life's design all right, yet," she said to herself passionately. "You cannot spoil it, Valentine,—you shan't,—you shan't! I will weave it into a fair and seemly length in spite of you,—in spite of you!" And she went to the piano and struck some chords that brought Max, eager, from the inner room.

He began to turn over the music; pausing and straightening himself as he came upon Gounod's "Quand tu Chantes." He put it on the rack before her. She swung round and shook her head.

"Not to-night, Max. . . . I want to talk to you."

"Just the 'Herbstlied,' first, then?"

"No, no. Come and sit down. I'll light the fire."

He came hurriedly forward.

"Stay! It is not cold. I will bring you a shawl."

She stamped her foot, knelt, struck a match and applied it in several places to the paper in the grate. The flames fled upward over the dry wood. She turned to him then with something of violence.

"I don't want a fire just when I am cold!" she exclaimed, vehemently. Then, more quietly, "I like fires, they are beautiful. I would have wood-fires always if I might. Look there! See that flame as purely blue as a hyacinth. And there is one gold like a crocus, and one purple as an iris. Perhaps flowers *are* flames, leaping from the molten centre of the earth, and moulded into enduringness by the sun and air." She spoke dreamily, gazing at the quivering tongues.

Max looked sulky.

"Well, I call it extravagant, on a—yes—a warm night. It has been a very hot day."

"We will open the window."

"Where is the sense of having a fire if we open the window and let the cold air in?"

"It was hot air a moment ago! . . . Oh, Max, don't let us quarrel! . . . I want to tell you something,—about a letter I had by this afternoon's post."

"Well?"

"It is from someone—a man—I knew at Sinodun."

"At Sinodun? . . . I thought—that is,—well," jealously, "who is it?"

"His name is Sw——Stadhampton."

Linders laughed unpleasantly.

"You do not seem very sure of it."

Veronica went on quietly.

"His name is Stadhampton," she said. "But he has also a title,—he is Lord Swarthe."

"Lord Swarthe?" He gripped her shoulder with a fierce pressure. "a lord?" he asked meaningly. "How should you know a lord? . . . I have heard you mention him,—never!"

"You must not speak to me like that, Max! . . . Old Lord Swarthe, Guy's,—this one's uncle, used to take an interest in some of the College girls."

A sneer distorted the man's face. A faint smile just lifted Veronica's lip.

"You are thoroughly absurd, Max. Jealous to the point of being ridiculous." He thrust her from him, and sprang up.

"Jealous, yes!" he cried. "Ach! Do I not know you, have I not watched men look at you and look again and again? . . . But it is over! You are mine now, mine,—do you hear?"

"Perfectly." There was bitterness in her voice.

She looked into the fire, but now the flames had died

to a dull and sulky glow. Only one, like a spray of silver, shut upwards from the darkened mass. "That is Hope," she thought. "I will not be discouraged." She began again to speak, steadily, patiently, as though she were at school, explaining some difficulty to a child.

"Max, I have not mentioned Lord Swarthe to you, because—well, because, practically, he went out of my life two years ago. But we have written since, occasionally. And soon, I hope, he will be married,—indeed, you have no cause for your absurd jealousy."

"Then let me read his letter!"

She looked at him, and something in the adorable frankness of her gaze made his unworthy thoughts shrink away, abashed.

"I shall not do that, of course, Max."

"If we were in Germany," he said, but without anger, though his gesture was violent, "I would make you."

She smiled.

"Would you, Max?" she said, softly. "Would you?"

"No, no, my darling! You shall do as you like, always. Are you not my little princesschen?"

Veronica had risen too. She came to him now, and laid her hand on his shoulder.

"I am your wife, Max," she said, gently.

"Yes, yes. . . . I am grateful . . . you know I am grateful, Vera."

"Oh, Max," she whispered. "I don't want gratitude,—I want you to love me . . . and understand me . . . if you can!"

"Of course I understand you, Vera." Her husband spoke in the offended tone that already she knew too well. His too-easily wounded amour-propre, his obtuseness at most other points, made him, she decided, easy to read.

"Then, if you understand me, Max, you must listen reasonably to what I am telling you."

"So!"

"Lord Swarthe has written to tell me of his coming marriage,——"

"Why to tell you? Do you know the lady?"

"I have never met her, but he has spoken to me of her. She—he has loved her many years,—a few months ago she became a widow. . . . They will marry when her mourning is ended." She paused, then added, reluctantly, it seemed, "His other object in writing was to send me—us—a wedding present."

"What is it?"

She held a piece of paper towards him, and he snatched it from her.

"A hundred pounds!"

"Yes."

"And you tell me he is merely a friend,—scarcely more than an acquaintance?"

"Yes, I tell you that certainly."

"I do not believe you!"

She fell back as though he had struck her.

"A hundred pounds! . . . Is it likely, I ask you—is it likely?"

"Sir Shem gave us a piano."

"Sir Shem gave us a piano, because his trusted employee I am!"

A fleeting smile touched her lips.

"A hundred pounds is nothing to Lord Swarthe. . . . He—he suggests we should spend it on a holiday."

"A holiday! . . . A hundred pounds! You must be mad!"

"Give it back to me! Don't make me hate you, Max!"

He stared at her with sombre intensity.

"What am I to think? . . . How do I know that you came to me pure? You are not as our German maidens,—you so strange English girls, who go about with so many men,—that Chamier,—how do I know about that night,—what happened!" And he laughed.

"Vile, vile that you are!" Her eyes were black with passion, and she was quivering with the outrage that he had offered her. "How dare you insult me so?"

There was something savagely exultant in his face as he continued to stare pitilessly at her. The cruelty, the capacity for torturing that dwell dormant in the hearts of many Germans, strove to be released. He began to speak slowly, brutally, with the marked gutturals into which anger betrayed him. Veronica, gazing back at him, proudly, fiercely, knew also the inherent stupidity that was chained to his cruelty. She smiled, slightly, maddeningly.

Her scorn infuriated him. With the quickened instinct that came to him where another's estimate of his character was concerned, he saw in the changed and brooding eyes of his wife something of tolerant compassion for a child's obstinate outburst, in the faintly-curled lip a tinge of indifferent pity and contempt. It lashed his conceit; he saw red. The humiliation of it bit into him, and savagery leapt uppermost. He strode forward and gripped her wrist, bending it backward until it ached almost unbearably, but she would not cry out.

"Do you think I believe your tale that you stayed in that house—with that man,—alone, perhaps for hours, and came out innocent? Gott in Himmel, I believed it —never!" He dropped her wrist suddenly, and went on in a different voice, silky, insinuating. "Shall I tell you what I believe . . . Vera? I believe that he—betrayed you,—and then you discovered that he did not mean to marry you (—why should he, when you went to him without marriage? . . . it is not so that virtuous girls act),—and you were afraid, and glad—glad—to marry me. Oho, that reaches the mark, does it?"

The girl's face was absolutely colourless, and her eyes were dilated enormously.

"And, believing that,—believing that," she whispered, speaking in gasps—"you wanted to marry me?"

"I meant you to be mine from the day I saw you," he answered, under jaw out-thrust. "So long as I got you, what did I care how!"

She looked at him still, and it was as though she had never seen him before. . . .

Suddenly, he pushed the scrap of pink paper towards her. She made a motion to seize it, but he drew it back, eluding her, with a movement that had something triumphant in it.

"Give it to me?"

"What do you want it for?"

She flashed out at him. "Since you think such vile things of me, I mean to burn it."

He laughed brazenly, mocking her. And swiftly, in that moment, she knew he lied. . . . He did not believe that she had given her innocence to Chamier,—he knew her spotless and unsmirched. Despite his asseverations, she felt that he knew her pure. And irrevocably, with that knowledge, she set him outside her life. Honestly to have harboured the thought of her violation,—honestly, if violently, to have accused her of it,—that she could have borne. But this, despicable, revengeful, childishly stupid, crudely animal,—this she could not forgive. This she would not tamely endure. She looked at him calmly, coldly, disdainfully.

"Burn it?" he mimicked, meaningly. "What you English say 'Money to burn,' eh? No, no, Vera,—we will spend it,—or, rather,—I will put it away for our children—our children,—my wife,—eh?"

The blood scorched over her pale cheek. "I have not endorsed it," she whispered, brokenly.

"So? . . . That is a small matter,—to me,—Vera. My little wife, who has promised to obey, would wish her husband to share her lover's gift, ja?"

"I will wire to him to stop payment," she said,—and knew her impotence. And suddenly she recognised that this man and her father, George Quening, were of one

type. Fundamentally, essentially, they were the same. Faintly adumbrated as it were, on her husband's face she could see the mask of George Quening,—the mask of one who stooped to war with women. Only . . . to this one she was bound . . . she could never hope that he would lock her from his home. . . . Well, so be it! Still, she would weave a fair and lovely pattern on the tapestry of life. She defied them all to ruin it,—her father,—Valentine,—Max! What had she still? Poetry and the secret exquisite passion that it gave, and that was to her like the heart of a lover beating against her own. Books! The moor,—the splendours of wind and wood! The love of a mother!—Friendship,—brimming, bubbling in the cup. . . . Brian! . . . Brian,—apart, apart,—her other self,—the mirror in which she had seen all the flowers of her learning unfold! Knowledge, at last,—full, overpowering, struck her like a blow! She swayed, fell into a chair. In the grate, the coals were black, the silver flame that had typified Hope was dead. . . . Max, smiling, watched her.

"Oh,—perhaps it was Vera,—so clever,—so beautiful,—that did not understand her Max," he said, gloatingly, at last. "Ach! We shall be good friends now that the stage is cleared, shall we not, little Vera?"

Through the long silence that fell, the peal of the door-bell broke.

Veronica roused herself.

"Do not answer it," she commanded, impulsively. "It will be Jennie,—I—I don't want to see her to-night."

For answer he moved into the passage. Immediately, she divined his purpose. He wanted, like all bullies, to show his power, to expose her in the hour of her weakness,—to let Jennie, of whom he was ever half-envious, see how her pride was wounded, her position lowered. Rallying her courage, she flashed past him, and herself flung the door wide. Mrs. Appleyard's great bulk filled the gloom of the doorway.

"E-e-h, well, Ronnie, yon's a hill, and no mistake."

Rage, frustration, disillusionment faded as Veronica looked on the familiar, huge figure.

"Oh, Mrs. Appleyard, do, do come in!" As she spoke, Veronica was all at once aware of a furtive resistance behind her. Inexplicably, but surely, she felt that she and Max were again antagonistic on some new issue of which she was unaware. He did not wish the Art Master's wife to enter. . . . She gripped the arm of her visitor. It yielded beneath her hands like a fat pillow. Then she reiterated her invitation, urgently, insistently.

"Isn't it too late, dear? You're thinking of getting to bed, happen. I've been at t' pictures, and suddenly I thought I'd like to see you. Happen you've been expecting me before now,—Bannister's kept nagging of me to come, and right sudden, at t' bottom of Popplewell Street, I felt as if you might be wanting me somehow. No,—I'll keep my bonnet on, dearie, till I get my breath,"—as though it were a cylinder of oxygen, thought Veronica, and wondered that she could smile inwardly, when her heart was broken. "So I hopped off tram, and came up. I can get another in a twenty minutes' time or so."

"No, you must stay to supper, of course . . . Max," with a great effort at naturalness, "go and light the gas at the stove, and I will make some coffee." Max disappeared, and Veronica curled up beside her old friend, and took the plump, cushiony fingers in which the rings seemed embedded, in her hand. There were tears in her eyes as she asked about Mr. Appleyard.

"Oh, he's very well, except for this here gout. I tell him he's lucky to have his complaint in his feet which aren't any good to hold brushes any road."

"And you have had your holidays?"

"Yes, love, we towered round a bit."

A flash of merriment at the delicious appositeness of this description of the immense pair's wanderings, sped the moisture from Veronica's eyes.

"And did Mr. Appleyard get much painting done?"

"Yes, he's very well satisfied. He's got a pretty bit of Ullswater he says you'll be sure to like,—it looks for all the world as if he'd spread a bit of purple chiffon over his paper,—something they call 'atmosphere' I think it is."

"I am sure it's lovely."

"Then we were at Keswick a bit, and back bi Morecambe,—and my words! I don't think I've ever *et* nicer shrimps,"—with a great jolly emphasis that hinted she might have met such graceful creatures socially, but not possibly consumed them,—"than what we had at that there 'igh-class Refreshment Rooms up at West End." She paused in exquisite reminiscence. "An' we got back last Monday, though it seemed a waste to stop in lodgings with all t' shops shut o' Sunday. Only Bannister got rather thick with another gentleman there,—a painter an' all, rather funny that was,—he was superintending a lot of chaps decorating the station waiting-rooms."

Veronica laughed.

"Oh, that sort of a painter! Now, I'm going to make the coffee, and cut some sandwiches."

She busied herself in the kitchen, shaking the aromatic coffee generously into the milk and water boiling in the saucepan, and arranging the sandwiches delicately, and setting them on the tray beside a cake that her mother had made for her the previous day. Max was nowhere to be seen. Slowly she regained composure. Then she lifted her tray and went back to her visitor, supine among the heaped cushions of the Chesterfield.

"Why, you've got nothing on the walls but them three little daubs of Bannister's," said that artist's wife, her mouth widening beyond a tricorne sandwich. "I'll send you a nice picture called the Soul's Awakening in English gold to fill up that there corner if you like, my dear."

Veronica refused, solemnly avowing her intention to let none but Appleyards grace her walls.

"Well, I can't hardly believe you're married, Ronnie," said Mrs. Appleyard at last, scooping crumbs from her lap and shaking them into the fireplace.

"It's quite true, though, Mrs. Appleyard. . . . Must you go? Then I will go to the bottom of the street with you. . . . Max—hopes you will excuse him,—he had to go to the post."

"That's all right, dearie; put your coat on, child,—it's turned a bit chilly, and we mustn't have our little lady catching cold. Go slowly, love! Downhill makes me wheeze a bit."

"Take my arm, Mrs. Appleyard."

"Nay, love, I'd happen break it," returned the ample lady with happy humour. "Then what would your fine young husband say? . . . He was a bit sly to tell us nowt about your wedding, Ronnie."

"When?"

"Why, love, that night you went off to London so quietly,—Parish Feast Saturday. Him and Bannister came along the road together,—Max had been up at organist's practising, and had his fiddle and all,—and he came in for a toathry minutes and had some cocoa, and was talking about going on a walking tower to Germany,—but not a word about wedding. . . . Why, Ronnie, what's up?"

Veronica, violently trembling, had come to a sudden halt. Her heart seemed to be calling through the darkness for help,—mother,—Guy,—Brian,—ah, Brian! She gave a sudden choking sigh and flung her hands out desperately.

"Are you sure? Are you sure?" she breathed. "Was it that night?"

"Why, yes, love. I was late up, packing to go Monday morning, and Bannister had been to Mr. Bennet's with them two little Bulkley bits,—he was coming along at after twelve when Max overtook him. . . . Ronnie, Ronnie,—what's the matter, darling?"

"Oh, God! Oh, God! . . . Liars . . . both liars!" came the whispering voice. "What shall I do?" And her heart called still, "Brian. . . . Brian. . . . Courage!" And as the last word seemed to wing from her, she lifted her head, kissed Mrs. Appleyard twice, very gently, and turned, mounting the hill slowly, as if she were very tired.

CHAPTER VI

BY the Autumn of the following year the damp stains were rustier on the walls of the Popplewell Street sitting-room, the pale cushion-covers had been shelved for the more resisting material of brown crash, the felt carpet was shabbier, the chintz music-box fuller, the light tapestry of the easy chairs shrouded in loose dustcoats of cretonne.

A change, too, was apparent in Max Linders, subtle yet unmistakable, a coarsening of the fine panther-like lines of his form, a thickening of features, a stiffening of the supple limbs; he had a growing predilection for late rising; a waxing interest in petty economies; reduced the laundry bills by the simple but unpleasant method of wearing a collar for a week and a shirt for a fortnight; pared his nails infrequently, yet too often, considering that it was usually at table that he chose to pay them much-needed attention. Veronica, who had once proudly thought that she could mould him at will, had long abandoned the attempt to inculcate in him the smallest niceties of personal care. He read little, nothing that was not mediocre. Often she smiled over his fondness for the bright-coloured weeklies, laughed outright when he quoted from the Interesting Items column of one of them: "There are thirty-five fair-haired people to every forty-four dark-haired persons in the county of Hertford." Or, "It is calculated that a London shop-girl walks during her hours of business an average of 7.37 miles daily." Once she found a red-backed notebook filled with what seemed to her an amazing jumble of similar ridiculous items. But of any use to which he put the information she was ignor-

ant. Books, as she knew books, meant as little to him as the bathroom. Both had their place,—made the house look more solidly presentable; with both he could uncomplainingly have dispensed.

But he played as divinely as ever; at times, in those long, comfortless months when Veronica waited the birth of her child,—listening to the wind along the strings of Linders' violin, to the throbbing poignancy of the nightingale pleading from its secret grove, to the caressing shudder that was the sound of a wave, lifting, breaking, scattering, in the little room,—she gave him still a measure of the love that once he might have won. She forgot the frequent "scenes" that marred their life; the humiliating reconciliations for which he claimed so high a price; the thousand daily annoyances to which he subjected her. She would sit and stare longingly into the velvety black eyes that could look so vivid, and were in reality so blank, so empty. Sometimes a spasm caught her throat, a desire to cry out to him,—"Is it saying anything to you,—that lovely Aria,—that seems to say so much? Can't I stretch out my hands and reach you somewhere, somehow, far above the ground of a passion too often sated? Now, there, where those exquisite notes go tripping, curtseying like pale-robed girls and buoyant youths among the burning-white columns of an old green-bowered temple,—or where that fabled bird calls hauntingly across the blossoms of fancy and imagination, honey-sweet and tinted like jewels?" . . . But she knew it was useless, and bitterness swept her heart. Nevertheless, those were her happy hours. She would sit, still and marvelling in the radiancy of her coming motherhood, while the long notes floated across the room to her, ethereal as argent moonbeams or rich as yellow sunlight falling on the dim and tattered colours that hung in the corner of a vast and empty church; or they came pattering in a sudden hurrying rush of impatient Spring rain, or drumming in the drone of heavy bees above swaying fields of bean-blossom;

or slowly, mystically unfolding, as a shadowy flower, wondering at its own loveliness, would stir and open wide petals to the amorous dusk. Or the notes came faster,—they were faintly-clanking jewels on the wrists and ankles of some brown Odalisc slave: or they rippled in the wistful sound of bells chiming across a lake; or splashed in gem-like drops from a leaping cascade; or trembled like the sigh of a lover whose love is dead. On strange, far journeyings her soul went alone in those long hours in the commonplace room, while her body, heavy and listless, hung motionless in the low chair. Often she wished it might never return to the hoarse, low whisper of her husband's voice, the clutch of his stealthy, eager hands. She would quiver with sick disgust to feel them in her hair, furtive yet bold on her neck and shoulders. She would rouse herself, and linger, wearily anxious, over the simple duties of her home, pushing away the moment, when, passion unleashed, he would take her into his hot embrace, and she would feel his breath upon her mouth, lashing him, freezing her; feel his arm about her, drawing her, half-resisting still, up the stair to the room above the street that never had its fill of air. . . . And afterwards she would lie with face close-pressed against the pillow, and her sick brain would prompt the banal phrase that rose to her lips,—"Honest woman! Honest woman! This is the price!" This degradation,—honesty! . . . And the impulse to laugh loudly, sardonically, startling her husband, supine beside her, into puzzled wakefulness, would seize her wildly. . . .

But in the last few weeks, peace from these hated intimacies had been hers. In June she had moved her clothes, her books, her small personal belongings, to the tiny room adjacent the still tinier bathroom, pleading the heat, her sleeplessness, restless tossing through the long, close nights. Max, sulky, but for the time being, impotent, endured the separation in which he did not acquiesce. Henceforth, her door was locked against him,

and there, seated at the table under the window opened to its limit, she sat and poured out her full heart in the throbbing little poems, that, without any technique but that which was innate, were aglow with beauty and passion, and wondering, wistful pain. Her thoughts fell on the white paper before her in a skein of golden words, which she read with always that naive, childish sense of surprise. Or she would sit far into the night and long for her airy room in Burling Lane, into which crept the scents and voices of the moor. . . .

One great joy she had, and she clung to it as though it were indeed her soul's barque,—Brian came often to the house in Popplewell Street. Came often, and stayed long; sometimes happily at home with her mother and Jennie in their frequent visits; sometimes coaxing Max into music, and sunnier, less suspicious mood; sometimes, her husband absent, sweetly alone with her over their books as in her childhood days. During the past Spring evenings she had begun again to read French with him. "And why not German with Max?" he had asked one fair pale evening when the front sitting-room was full of the scent of jonquils. "It is such a splendid opportunity, and when you go with him to Lubeck——"

Veronica looked at him silently a moment. He thought how she had grown in inner grace and exquisite understanding. She laid her hand on his arm and sighed.

"I shall never go to Germany," she said. Then, with sudden vehemence, "And I hate his language,—I won't learn it."

"Yet Goethe wrote it, dear."

"Yes,—but he could not help it. It *expresses* Max. Yes, it does, Brian,—those harsh, unlovely sounds, you can't imagine how I have grown to hate them. Luckily," lightening the emphasis of her speech with a swift laugh, "he seldom speaks his own language now, except to say horrible things sometimes,—much as my father used coarse expressions in rough dialect to annoy me."

Brian's face was tenderly grave.

"You are not losing faith, Veronica, are you?" he asked, gently. "Faith, I mean, in the ultimate good, the end that justifies."

A swift radiance lit the lovely features of the girl.

"Oh, Brian, no!" she whispered. "Why, haven't you guessed?—the 'ultimate good' will be mine in five short months!" Her eyes plumbed happy depths.

He passed his hand swiftly across his brow.

"Ah, darling," he said, "you make me almost contented. If this,—this house—the work to which you have been unaccustomed, and which must often seem heavy and distasteful,—Max's materialism, almost, in spite of his music,—his grossness,—if these had crushed you, quenched the flame of your faith,—oh, Veronica, life would be a very bitter thing to me to-day!"

"Max,—yes, you are right,—he is gross; I have faced it long ago, and now it scarcely hurts,—Max could never quench what you have lit and kept burning so long, Brian," she said, leaning towards him and speaking earnestly.

"Thank God for that! Faith lights up all the dark and tortuous ways. People say, 'Have faith in God!' . . . Veronica, Faith is so good, so ennobling, that I believe that it *is* God."

"Yes. . . . I like that thought, Brian," Then using the low sweet tones of recollection, "Do you know what helped me enormously once, last year, in a very bitter moment? . . . It was the thought of you,—of your splendid name. I felt as if my heart were bruised, as if I might forget Faith's flame then, shining with too remote a light. I wanted something near, to sustain me,—a rock to lean upon. And suddenly I found myself whispering your name,—'Brian—Courage!' And all the way,—just up the street, really, but it seemed miles, a little echo seemed to be answering,—'Veronica—Courage!'"

All at once the inference to be drawn from the juxta-

position of the two names struck her. In the soft dusk her face flamed. She closed her eyes swiftly, but she could not blot out the transfiguration that had illumined Brian's face. The throbbing moments lengthened; cries of children at play in the steep street came to them. At last he spoke.

"Ah, God!" he whispered, coming close to her, but keeping his arms rigidly at his sides, "if I could have helped you with my name, once, when you needed it sorely, my love,—my love!"

She lifted the white lids, and looked at him yearningly, tenderly. Then she laid her hand in his.

"You have helped me all my life, Brian. . . . You help me,—ah, how much!—still," she breathed with ineffable sweetness; and on the words went swiftly from the room.

And now the time was drawing very near for the consummation of her desires and longings. In the drawer of her dressing-table lay frothing heaps of lacy garments, just those selfsame garments which every mother has stitched with golden threads of glory and silver threads of hope. She would turn them over and sigh and smile, visualising as best she might, the lovely little creature whose fingers seemed already to knock like curved flower petals upon her heart. In those days of deep Autumn when the cold winds began to come down from the moor, Veronica was very happy. Peace, like the folding of huge white wings, was hushed about her. It was in those days that she wrote what many later thought her most beautiful work,—the series of ten sonnets that she called "The House of Waiting."

One evening, when Max was in Bradford,—where he had several compatriots, (though none had even been presented to his wife),—Jennie and Veronica sat together in the front room of the house in Popplewell Mount. A fine rain, falling like a sigh, shirred through the gloom.

In the grate a bright fire burned, and in its glow, smooth brown hair and waving gold leaned together. Jennie was touching with gentle, podgy finger the dainty length of embroidery in which Veronica had been setting the close, small stitches of exquisite precision.

"Isn't it lovely?" she said. "Oh, Ronnie, don't you wonder what it will be like?"

Veronica smiled, realising that the pronouns did not signify the same thing.

"Don't call your god-daughter 'it,' please, Miss Dixon!"

"You are sure it will be a girl, of course!" teased Jennie.

"Of course!"

"Well, I hope so."

"And you will not mind my not calling her Jane, will you?"

"Goodness,—no! It *is* a name, isn't it? First come, first served with all the old aunts' names! Then along comes Number Two, and gets called Maud or Gertie. . . . Gertie's a very nice name, isn't it?"

"Um'm! . . . It seems to suit most Gerties all right, I must admit. . . . Perhaps we grow like our names. . . . My baby's going to be Deirdre."

"O-o, Ronnie, what a funny name!"

"Isn't it? Killingly humorous!"

"I don't mean that sort of funny," amended Jennie, seriously. "Odd-like, more! We can call her 'Dear' for short, though."

"And she is going to have black velvet eyes like Max, and close little curls something the colour of mine,—not quite so red, perhaps. . . .

"And feet,—Ronnie! Have you thought about her feet? . . . And her hands?" whispered the unreadily articulate Jennie.

"I dream about her hands,—curled round the kiss the angels left in her wee palm; and her little feet tread the winepress of my heart. Ah, baby,—

'I have spread my dreams under your feet,
Tread softly because you tread on my dreams.'"

she quoted in a low, tender voice.

"We *will* love her, Ronnie."

"And teach her,—Brian will help to teach her too,—she shall learn to find all—that I have lost."

"But you are happy, Ronnie, aren't you? You've got such a nice home,—that lovely pianner and everything,—and a nice sideboard and then two bedroom suites, a walnut and an oak. And Max is . . . so handsome,—and a bathroom,—and now your baby coming,—why, it doesn't seem as if you would have anything left to wish for, does it?"

"Perhaps I haven't! . . . Jennie, I believe there is something you want to tell me,—you look—well,—'flustered,' shall we say?"

"Flustered? . . . O-o,—I don't think I'm flustered,—not what you could call flustered, I don't think."

"Out with it, Jennie Wren!"

"But are you feeling strong to-night, Ronnie?" Then, with a burst, "He's come back!"

Veronica's hand went to her heart; then, as though she were impatient at doing something she would have been expected to do on the stage, it fell to her knee, rose-pink in the firelight against the dark silk of her loose gown.

Jennie, having taken her fence, raced to the next.

"Old Josh is dying, they say,—I met Charlie Bird,—the old chap had sent for that there feller,—Chamier,—and he came last night. Bird says they are full of it at the office, as everybody thought him and his uncle must have quarrelled. Bird was at Slingsby House this morning with Stevenson, the head clurk, an' he says he's altered a lot. Thinner, and paler than ever, and his eyes right funny,—no, you told me not to say funny when I meant queer,—right queer,—sort of haunted, Charlie Bird says.

Bird thinks he must have been flayed he wasn't going to get old Josh's brass left him,—but, however, the old chap introduced that there—well, *Mister* Chamier, then,—as the new master and his heir," concluded Jennie, aspirating generously, and slipping her needle-pricked fingers up and down her friend's quiescent hand.

"Thank you, Jennie."

"He'll never have the nerve to come up here, should you think?" went on Jennie, anxiously.

"No! . . . It does not matter, anyhow, dear."

Jennie stared.

"Why, Ronnie——"

Veronica looked at her with sweet gravity.

"There isn't any room for him, now, Jennie, in my heart. . . . I don't hate him. I don't care about him. It is just as if he were someone I had read about a very long time ago,—that I was interested in at the time, but have forgotten now. . . . Or if not exactly forgotten, someone who has ceased to matter, but for whom I am vaguely sorry,—like—well,—like Charles the First," finished Veronica gaily, laughing at her friend's bewilderment. "And, talking of the spacious times of history, Jennie,—there has been a tramp as of armed men in the passage outside the house for the last hour. Have you noticed it?"

Dusky red surged into Jennie's round, smooth cheeks.

"That's not a tramp," she stammered, "that's—well," bravely, "that's Harry Bates, I expect."

"Harry Bates?"

Jennie was busy smoothing and patting the piece of embroidery, touching its daisy stars reflectively.

"Yes, Harry Bates! He was in the old 'Dads,'—you remember Harry Bates? . . . Mind you don't get your iron too hot when you press this."

Veronica tilted the downbent face.

"Never mind about pressing that . . . Jennie Dixon!"

"Yes, Ronnie?" with a quick veiling of happy eyes after a shy, rapid glance.

"Tell me about it,—now,—this minute!"

"Oh, Ronnie!" And in a sudden access of bravery, Jennie sent the rays of happiness shining in soft eyes quivering into her friend's heart.

"That's all right, darling," whispered Veronica, "you have told me. . . . Oh, Jennie, how glad I am,—how happy you have made me feel!"

"Harry has a lot of ambition,—he likes inventing things,—he isn't always going to be a moulder, Ronnie," ventured Jennie, presently.

Veronica flung her arms round the girl and drew her close against her breast.

"Ah, Jennie, I hope he always will be," she said, "the moulder of your happiness, and make your life splendid with love, always. . . . Now, bring him in; I like him so much,—he is a fine man. Out in the rain, all that time, —heartless little wretch you are, Jennie!"

Jennie laughed.

"I expect he was dry in the passage," she said, happily.

"We will try to remedy that if you bring him in and help me to get supper," smiled Veronica, in gay mood.

Came a night in late October when in the chill sitting-room, the old doctor talked fitfully with a restlessly pacing Max, while upstairs Veronica lay, brow dewed, hands desperately clenched upon a rope of twisted sheet, mouth grotesquely drawn above locked teeth, wet hair weighing down her head with its heavy braid.

Silently, about the bedroom, Mrs. Quening and Mrs. Dixon went, their pitying eyes ever focussed on the beloved distorted face on the pillows. Sometimes, an anguished moan strung itself out in slow-dropping links of agony across the room, when the women would very swiftly and tenderly raise the girl, and guide her frantically-clinging hands to their steadying arms, or grasp

the damp wrists in their strong and kindly palms. Ever and again, the doctor came softly into the bedroom, shook his head and silently vanished again. Between the sheer depths of horrible, undreamt-of pain, broke spells of comparative ease, when Veronica's dulled senses seemed steeped in a strange opiate, as though she lay, spent, but peaceful, upon some little sunlit island, with the rocks that had torn her and the waves that had broken her, for the moment futile, yet greedily, stealthily, waiting about her. Once, she whispered hoarsely, in a queer, unsteady voice.

"My mouth,—mother,—it will never be straight again, —I can't make it go straight,—it is all crooked——" And while her step-mother soothed her, the rocks bared their cruel fangs once more, and she was flung, naked, struggling, upon them from the cold clutch of the waves. And again she went down . . . down . . . down . . . While strange and dreadful monsters clawed her as she passed; and while the knowledge smote her that now she must indeed die, choked, breathless, among the green strangling weeds and heavy-pressing, jelly-like bodies of noxious things,—the agony was gone and she was lying on the smooth hot grass, that burnt her like a flame while she shivered in the dank veil of her wet hair, and the echoes of her foolish, useless cries startled the exquisite, lonely stillness. . . . So this was motherhood, —this Gethsemane—that mothers of all time said went unrecorded through the later years! . . . Even Mrs. Dixon, hovering beside the washstand,—had told her that, — had promised speedy forgetfulness,—that a few short weeks would wipe this agony from her memory as a sponge the writings on a slate. . . . So many had borne it all, —the months of discomfort and weariness and loss of charm,—had been tortured, torn, rent,—for what? . . . Ah!—for Heaven,—teach me, God, to endure it! And suddenly the memory of the betrayed child going like a shadow through the sunshine of the moor came to her;

the ghost of the child-mother whom she never knew, came, and laid small hands of soothing and sustaining upon her. And quite surely, she knew that she, too, could endure. . . . The minutes,—the hours . . . passed.

Max drank coffee and talked; while the doctor sensing the crude and elemental anxiety that tossed upward in a word or phrase through the tangle of commonplaces he babbled, listened patiently.

"It is an ordeal we men cannot fathom," said the doctor, sipping his strong coffee.

"Natürlich!" with unintentional relapse into his native tongue that his companion could not know betokened nervousness. "Áber—it will be fine to have a son,—and so many seem to go through it so easily!" The arrogant swagger only half covered anxiety again.

"Your wife has much to suffer before that is accomplished," said the old man dryly.

"My cousin Ernstine was ill but three hours,—und dann—a fine boy! . . . Ah! . . . My son may yet go to Heidelberg or Bonn!" he added, musingly.

"The Teutonic temperament lends itself amiably to these crises," snapped the doctor, who detested all foreigners and loathed Germans. "But you must admit there are creatures of a finer spirit, a rarer delicacy,—and to these——!" He paused meaningly.

Max shrugged his shoulders, but was silent, and soon again the doctor had left him alone. This time he was longer in returning, and Linders grew restless. He mended the small fire frugally, took up his violin, replaced it silently, and began to pace up and down over the brown floor-felt. After a while he sat down and drew his absurd, red-backed note-book from his pocket and studied it gravely. "One person in every seventeen is colour-blind." . . . . "It is computed that three million pins disappear in England every year." . . . But his mind

was far from what he read. Veronica would give him a child,—a son,—other children,—several sons and perhaps one daughter. Yes, one would be enough,—but sons,—four,—five,—six! They were young,—yes, he could hope for six! He gloated over the thought,—he saw them so plainly, from the studious youth of fourteen to the toddler of three, in his plaid dress and hard, round hat. . . And he saw them—not in the street outside, now so unwontedly still, not in Bevan Park among the roses and rhododendrons,—but walking decorously, two and two, along Unter Den Linden to the Tiergarten. . . .

Suddenly, the door opened, and Mrs. Dixon's face appeared for a moment.

"Ronnie is very ill," she said, speaking with a catch in her calm voice. ". . . . There are twins,—one is dead,—there is just a chance we may save the other. Hurry now! Fetch Dr. Graham! . . . See how quick you can be!" And she was gone.

As Linders let the outer door fall behind him, a low and desperate wail shivered through the house.

* * * * *

Dawn slid her pale fingers through the opening of the tent that housed half the world and shook her tattered, murky-red duster across the Eastern sky.

Over the moor, the lonely figure of a man went, wearily. He stood a moment and watched her with her brush, the morning wind, sweep the shadows like grey cobwebs from the distant heights. Then he went onward, to his unwanted breakfast in his poor lodgings, and the routine of the day that had ceased to call. . . .

On the outskirts of the awakening town, another man, to whom sleep often now refused to come, watched her, too, between the pinnacles of the tall trees that stood about Slingsby House, and, watching, forgot that half a million of money waited at his command, and knew only that his hands and heart were empty. He leaned from

the window, shivered at that chill touch, then withdrew, flinging himself again on the bed in utter weariness of brain and spirit. . . .

But in the little house in Popplewell Mount the dawn went unseen by those behind the drawn blinds. In the tiny room that had been consecrated with her pure dreams, lay the still and perfect forms of Veronica's dead babes; and in the other, hushed and dark, she,—mother at last,—childless! Then, indeed, for a space while the leaden hours crawled, she went down into the abyss that is called Despair. . . .

CHAPTER VII

THREE letters dropped like stones into the quiet pool of Veronica's life during the next two years.

The first was written by Valentine Chamier, in the few and restless days that perforce he spent at Slingsby House. The great business was left in the hands of a manager, to whom Stevenson, the head clerk, gave ungrudging meed of help. The big, ugly house, for long months vacant, would be stirred to a pretence of life when a brief message from London or Paris or Vienna, gave notice of the young owner's coming. That he looked haunted, as much by excess as remorse,—unless indeed the two were one,—was palpably true. The still, secret eyes were no longer belied by the gay mouth,—it was set in a hard line of self-scorn, that was, in spite of its hardness, less evidence of strength than weakness. Sometimes, on those rare visits, he went far out on the moor, seeming to search, yet to dread finding. And when he returned, baffled, yet in a strange way relieved, his lips had a bitter twist, and the reposeless, revealing hands shook as they lifted the wine-glass, or tapped the cigarette that had no power to soothe, or turned the leaves of books that could not beguile.

"The heart is gone out of me!" he cried aloud one night to the silence, and hid his aching eyes on his folded arm. There in the darkness he could see her. The gold, dancing specks became fluent waves,—they were her glorious hair; and in it the pearl and rose tints of her face bloomed softly. There was her red sweet mouth,—God! how sweet!—there the laughing, wistful, passionate eyes. . . . And once again, the something mysterious, en-

chanting, exquisite in her stung his memory, and lashed his pain. She had been so nearly his,—fool that he had been to set any price too high to pay for her,—the sweetness of holding her, the joy of hearing her voice, of watching her lips frame the words she loved, the words of poets set in their apt and lovely form,—a gratification that was to him, as to her, a passion. He, too, had loved the resonance of chosen syllables, fitly mated and linked, as he had loved the great Nature pictures of the world,—the rose-wreathed warm whiteness of Italy, the wide splendour of sweeping orange-yellow desert, the moon-blanched stillness of the rolling veldt. . . . How she had longed to feast her eyes on them,—and the desire that he had had to show them to her had whetted his pleasure in them anew. . . . And now the music and the beauty were gone from all. . . . Clamorous his grief and loneliness woke in him again, with their sad and relentless cries.

He had heard of her,—how had he not heard of her? In the coarse speech of Charlie Bird, flattered by an invitation to spend an evening at Slingsby House, who, led by many a subtle route, primed with his unwilling host's cigars and wine, had at last—at last—babbled with loosened tongue of the girl who had mocked or ignored him in the days of his flight into Drama.

"But I've chucked all that there now, Mr. Chamier, sir; a funny lot got into the 'Dads' after you and Miss Quening left,—Mrs. Linders that is. Queerish thing that wedding of hers was! Sly, my young lady, Miss Miller, thought it."

"Is she comfortable in her marriage, do you think?" asked Valentine, flagellating himself before the common little clerk.

"Oh, she's all right, I should say! Linders should have a decent screw, but he's a queer chap. Funny temper, I dessay. . . . She lost her kid,—two, in fact, twins it was. Wanting to get on in a hurry, eh?" laughing coarsely.

Valentine crushed the desire to fling his companion from the stone balcony—it was a warm evening in Spring, —on which they were sitting, turning the subject by asking a casual question about Gilbert Hammond, now reputed touring in a fourth-rate melodrama . . . and the moment passed.

But in the night,—the long, long night,—the picture came again. Came again, and would not be shut out. There it was,—the picture of a pale, sad Veronica, weeping, weeping, in the veil of her hair. . . . So clear it was, so urgently hopeless the abandonment of her grief, that almost it seemed his restless, plucking fingers might, outstretched, touch the broken, drooping figure, and, fluttering over the bowed head fall to immobility above those hurt, bewildered eyes . . . the eyes that had smiled at him, candid, trusting. . . . And suddenly she was looking at him again, scornfully hostile. . . . A cry escaped him, the sweat broke in drops on his brow. . . . The phantasmagoria shifted; he saw her again, far out across a tangled valley, mounting a distant green slope with buoyant steps, her hand in the hand of another, going from him, momentarily receding, more faintly outlined against the sunlit slope. He tried to call her,—he was so lonely. The horror of his loneliness, his utter isolation, pierced him. He had set out with her, it seemed, and just as they had begun to climb, had turned and left her, eager to make certain that the bundle of his household gods was safe,—easy living, freedom, the gratification of the senses,—little smooth, fat, ivory idols. Yes, there they were, smiling up at him with their foolish faces. And, relieved, he had hastened to rejoin her, but, in the moment a vast, tangled forest had grown and barred his way. . . . He could see her dim,—ever dimmer, passing away out of his life. And while he watched, all the fat white gods that he had counted against her began to roll away from him, rapidly, tumbling over each other in their haste, trundling so fast that in the second he was alone,

and night and storm and the great black wings of fearsome birds closed about him, shutting out that light and lovely figure going upwards into the strong sunshine. . . .

Was he waking or dreaming? He knew not, only that he could not go on,—this was unendurable. Swiftly he rose, threw on a dressing-gown and crossed to the open window. It was three o'clock, an early morn of May, floating softly, graciously, towards daybreak. There had been rain, and the air was full of the delicious scent of wet lilac. He knew that there were great masses of it, purple, mauve and creamy white, bordering the stiff drive. He drew in the breath of it, marvelling that, in all his pain, it could touch one chord that thrilled to joy. He turned away abruptly, closed the curtains, and lit the lamp. Then he wrote—

"I need you," he began, without preface. "If a God there be,—and I call him his name too frequently to doubt it now,—then God be my witness that my need of you is great! Will you see me somewhere, somehow,—and still to peace for a few moments the longing that is gnawing me? In the name of the love we once bore each other, —I plead with you." And signed it as of old, "Valentine."

The weeks passed, sharp-chiselled by waiting. High Summer came. There was no reply. Once, restlessly passing through the congested streets he met Gertie, full-bosomed, ripe-mouthed, walking bare-headed, under the fading saffron of the evening sky. Before he realised the impulse that drove him, he had paused, halted. Gertie, with a half-bold, half-bashful giggle, stopped too.

"Miss Dixon, I believe? I met you once, with your sister and . . . . Miss Quening. My name is Chamier."

"Yes, I remember." Then, abruptly, "She's married now, you know."

They walked on. Suddenly, he realised that exactly here he had met Veronica once, blown like a flower towards him on the breeze of Spring. A dreadful pain shot

through him; he clenched his hands and tasted the bitterness of his loss once more. Gertie was looking at him, anxiously, curiously. He smiled, wholly mirthless.

"Who? Your sister?" he parried.

'Oh, Jennie!" lifting the corner of her full lip scornfully. "Yes, she going to be,—when they can afford it. She's engaged to a moulder feller, half the size of a house, with big square toes to his boots. . . . No, I meant Ronniker." Her sharp glance raked his ravaged face again. She laughed cruelly.

"You don't believe in marriage, Miss Gertie?"

She tossed her head.

"Oh, but I do, Mr. Chamier! . . . Only I don't believe in *roa*mance. Now Ronniker Quening and our Jennie are both moony,—though Jennie doesn't look it,—they've both got their heads screwed on the wrong way, and they've lost the screwdriver to shift them round with. . . . Bates isn't so bad, barring being big enough to eat her,—but Linders!"

She paused and stood, slightly swaying, at the top of Silver Street. Her coarse black hair, heavily-lidded brown eyes, red-brown cheeks and full, scarlet mouth, seemed to speak of a more Southern cradle than the moorland Yorkshire town. She thrust out her hand, work-stained and ill-shapen.

"I'm going to a house down here," she said, shortly. "I'll say good-night."

"But . . . can you not spare me a few moments longer? . . . I—I would like to see you again."

She looked at him with a sulky smile, misreading his intentions.

"I'm too busy for fellers," she answered. "I'm goin' to get a singing lesson. . . . There, I've told you," with impatient surprise, "and nobody else knows. . . . I go every night to this chap. . . . He says I've got a splendid voice,—nobbut its been 'awf-rewined. . . . I don't know why I'm tellin' you this," resentfully, "our

Jennie hates you, and though she's queer, she's gen'ally right."

"Does she so hate me?" he asked in a low voice. "Ah, loyal Jennie! Rare, narrow heart!" He mused in silence for a moment ". . . But you have no cause to hate me, Miss Gertie."

"Me? . . . No! I don't bother either about fratchin' wi' folks or sittin' in their pockets." Something magical poured into her sleepy eyes: it was Ambition. She flung up her bare head. "I'm goin' to get on i' t' world!" doggedly.

"Bravo! That's the spirit! Now won't you tell me how you propose to do it?"

Unconsciously, she began to walk forward with him. Soon, they were talking earnestly. The dark head and coarsely handsome profile were almost on a level with his. She walked boldly, swinging forward with a long, free stride.

Once, she made a little, despairing gesture.

"It's hard work," she said, passionately. "There's none of us talk proper! Do you think I can't see t' difference betwixt your lingo and ours? And that's where I'm going to be *done*,—Blat Watkinson can learn me to sing all right,—but how in hell am I going to learn how to speak!" She paused aghast at the uncouth expression that had escaped her lips. She turned on him with a flash of temper. He smiled, less bitterly. The girl interested him.

"Tell me what you would like to do?" he said. Her face hardened, then broke up in surprising, childish softness.

"I'd like to go to school again," she said, ashamedly. Suddenly, her rough hands went up to her eyes. She began to speak quickly, defiantly.

"Sometimes I'm flayed I'll nivver fetch up wi' what I want to do. I get eighteen bob a week at t' shop, and I pay mother ten, and yet more nor I pay for; I put three

shillings a week by for my clothes, and I pay Blat Watkinson sixpence a night for a twenty minutes' lesson. I shan't hev no money for t' Feast holiday this year," meeting his eyes with a hard stare. "But I'd care nowt about that if I could feel I was getting on. . . . Ronniker talks lovely,—only she doesn't like me (and no wonder,—I allus was a surly beggar),—and that there German fair makes me sick, so I don't never go there. Jennie isn't so bad,—but the girls at the shop! . . . Sometimes I awmost pluck up courage to start an' try an' talk fine,—and then I daresn't. They'd nivver let up about it."

They had reached the foot of Burling Lane. It wound away from the broad Caven Street, a glade of green bloom. From Bevan Park came the scent of pinks and the playtime calls of belated children, wringing the last dewy sweetness from the June day. Valentine's brow contracted; all at once a blur of tears filmed his eyes, stingingly painful. Another hand striving restlessly, impatiently, to turn the leaves of the book of Life. A hand less dear, less soft and gentle than the hand he had ruthlessly stricken aside. He bit his lips over the cry of remorse that bubbled up in him.

"Gertie," he said,—and his voice was so hoarse that she looked at him, startled, half-fearful.

His laugh broke upon her glance.

"Why, girl," he soothed her, "I want nothing of you, ever. Only, I would like to help you. Listen! I have more money than I know what to do with. You will ease my conscience a feather-weight if you will take some of it,—and go to school as you declared you wished to do."

She flushed deeply, and suddenly, her mouth began to work. He averted his eyes.

"I'm too old, aren't I?" she stammered, awkwardly. "I'm turned twenty-two."

"No matter! Get right away from here,—I will find a place,—not a school exactly,—at Cheltenham, perhaps, or one of the East Coast towns. Now, will you accept

that offer? I have a shred of honour left, and on that I assure you of my disinterestedness."

She looked at him straightly, with those softened eyes.

"You're a good 'un, anyhow! . . . Our Jennie's wrong, I reckon. . . ." She was still fixedly regarding his impassive countenance. Then she laughed through the mist of tears that made her face once more child-like and soft. "No, you'll nivver want nowt of me,—you can't eyt blegs after peaches," she said, with a touch of her father's shrewdness. ". . . I *do* accept, and I'm thankful, more than I can say. I'll pay you back your money some day, but I can't pay you something more than brass that you've given me to-day. . . . I had a pain here," touching her breast with a wild gesture, "and it's gone. I was beginning to get desprit. . . . Why do you do it?"

"I was beginning to get desperate, too, Gertie."

"You! . . . Why, you can go where you like,—do what you like,—you're in the swim."

"The gods on the Bridge had been having rare sport at my attempts to keep afloat these two years." He shrugged his shoulders. "For the moment you have stopped their cackling, Gertie."

"E-eh? . . . Oh, I see! . . . It does seem sometimes as if they're havin' fun up there watching us tiddlers swim round in our glass jam jar, doesn't it?"

He nodded appreciatively. "Good, Gertie! . . . Laugh at life as long as you can,—mock Fate or it will mock you." He took her hand. "And now, good-night!"

She answered him soberly, and turned and walked swiftly away.

That night he wrote his second letter to Veronica Linders, and slept druglessly and dreamlessly until long past the June dawn.

That letter fell through the door slit of Number One, Popplewell Mount, as Veronica listlessly descended the

meagre stair the next morning. The only one, it lay like a patch of snow on the brown oilcloth. Her heart and step quickened, her hand trembled as she slit the rough, thick flap of the envelope.

"I want you to forget that I called for the help you could not grant me, in case it should vex your gentle soul that you must withhold it. I see now that I have no right to your assistance. I was wrong to beg of you,—wrong and weak. I must earn your forgiveness, not cadge for it. To-day something has happened. I have seen strength of purpose in a young and untutored creature that has made me ashamed of my weakness."

She stood a moment longer, intent upon the words. She found hope in them, and smiled suddenly with great sweetness. The she went on to the kitchen and filled the kettle at the bright tap above the sink, sliced the bacon and broke the eggs, set the table and called Max to breakfast. He came down yawning. But her knowledge of him had, she thought, long pierced him through and through. The sight of his heavy morning face no longer caused her a tremor of emotion. She neither scoffed nor pacified. Even disgust seemed torpid, if not dead. . . . They sat down in silence and broke their fast. . . .

In the common round of tasks conscientiously performed, the Summer days wore on. The afternoons generally brought her stepmother, and sometimes Mrs. Dixon or Mrs. Appleyard. Occasionally, Miss Murgatroyd, a trifle more bony, a few degrees more faded, slipped like a pale shadow into one of the little front room chairs and lingered over a cup of tea with her beloved pupil. Once, the conversation strayed into forbidden ways that made the pretty ears of the pale governess burn.

"Marriage must be such a beautiful experience," she ventured, enviously looking round the room, gay wth flowers.

Veronica laughed, and the sound held bitterness.

"So far I have discovered only one experience that

makes it different from the celibate life," she answered, caustically. "As for its beauty——"

Miss Murgatroyd flushed and took a piece of cake hurriedly.

"Oh, Veronica,—do you mean——? But there is the joy of having children,—you must look forward to having children some day," she stammered.

The mobile lips opposite curled.

"You are confusing motherhood with married life, dear Miss Murgatroyd. . . . And you know marriage is not absolutely a necessary preliminary to that experience."

Miss Murgatroyd was perturbed. . . . She stole a hurried glance at her hostess,—and for the first time saw the shadow of pain lying in the laughing eyes she had loved. . . . "She is fretting still about her babies," she thought pitifully.

"But,—Ronnie,—you forget the companionship of a man who loves you,—surely that is a rare joy that marriage alone can give!"

"Haven't you ever noticed how little companionship there is between most married couples? . . . You see they don't think about anything so wearing as that when they are in love. . . . A man chooses a girl because she is pretty and wears her clothes gracefully, and can amuse him when he is tired. She accepts him because she has been told that there is a certain status to be derived from being a married woman, and because she likes the way his hair goes, and because she has heard there is another girl who wants him. . . . Afterwards, the girl doesn't seem as pretty somehow when she has a coarse apron on, and is down on her knees scrubbing the linoleum in the hall, and very soon he doesn't notice whether she wears her frocks gracefully or not, so long as she wears them long enough,—in time, not inches, I mean; and after she has washed a hundred thousand greasy dishes she is too sick at heart to amuse him much. Besides

she has begun to yawn when he airs his views. . . . As for the wife, she finds the status was a myth, and his hair probably soon goes altogether,—and the other girl who desired him is free and gay and envied, or like herself, a slave,—and pitied."

The governess stirred her tea agitatedly.

"Oh, Ronnie,—but have you no pride in your pretty little house,—your handsome husband?"

Her companion laughed.

"Oh, I am only generalising!" she said lightly. "My case is quite different, of course. . . . Come and look at these photographs of Max's cousin Gertrud. See, that is she! He did not like my laughing at her feet. Fancy being married in buttoned boots! And this is Wanda. Look at her plaits,—and her bouquet! And old Tante Hildegarde in the background! And—yes,—the bridegroom, I had almost forgotten him. How scared he looks! Yet he is a sausage-maker in a large way of business,—and they have gone to Lucerne for their 'Flitterwoch' . . . Lucerne! Can you *imagine* them? . . ." So she rattled on, and Miss Murgatroyd laughed and forgot her misgivings. . . . Until, as she was buttoning her long mackintosh in the passage, preparatory to going, Veronica looked at her with tragedy suddenly unveiled in her eyes.

"Sometimes Max talks of going back to live in Germany," she said.

"Going back?"

"I think—I am almost sure it is a threat. . . . He uses it to induce me to go to my father . . . and be reconciled to him."

"And you will not do that?"

"Oh,—never,—never! . . . You don't know. . . . Nor will I go to Germany,—I will run away before I will do that, Miss Murgatroyd." Fear clouded her eyes again. "But he would find me . . . and force me to go with him somehow," she finished on low tones.

Miss Murgatroyd took her hand and stroked it softly; her eyes were full of tears.

"Courage!" she said, stepping on to the narrow garden-path. And all at once, Veronica smiled, and fear and tragedy had fled her eyes surprised.

But the governess shook her head, and her wet mackintosh on the steps of her lodgings, and sighed heavily.

"Sometimes I wonder if Veronica is perfectly happy," she whispered to herself, setting her umbrella in the painted drain-pipe, and rubbing her serviceable shoes on the yellow fibre mat that gave her "Welcome" in letters of deeper brown.

The months had slipped by, and another year had been born when Valentine's third letter came to Veronica. It found her in pensive mood, sitting over a bright fire with a volume of Swinburne on the lap of her brown velvet frock which the lambent gleams of flame were barring with gold. Outside, snow was leisurely falling. She watched the postman fumble with numbed fingers in his bag, and was out in the passage, eager, book forgotten, before he turned heavily on clogged shoes from the door. . . . One from Guy, the postmark Sydney,—she paused for a moment's wonder that there high Summer burned,—then glanced at the other envelope. . . . So that hand could still make her heart beat a shade more quickly; in the oak-framed mirror surrounded by utility hat-pegs, she smiled at the flush that burnt her cheeks. She went into the parlour, closed the door and sank again into the low basket chair. . . . The letter, addressed from Half-Moon Street, lay in the hand that slightly trembled, the closely-written pages looked friendly, the firelight played on them in welcome. . . . The smile still hovered about her lips.

"Véronique," she read, "do you remember, as we walked across the moor on our last night together, some words you said said to me,—that life is less what one finds than what one feels? You wonder that I can write of that?

I can at last because something tells me the time is near when you will fall asleep forgiving me. What one feels . . . . and what one finds! All my life I have been searching, searching, for the crock of gold,— and knew not when I had found it, because I had never learnt to feel,—to put myself in the place of another. I loved you, and my love was compounded all of baseness and greed and covetousness. Then I lost you and I began to feel,— first only rage and pain,—and then, after a long while,— remorse. . . . . At last came something else, stirring shadowily in the depths,—the chance came to me to do something for a fellow-creature,—to me who had measured all others only by their capacity to give me pleasure. By it I learnt the sweetness of helping others,—and at last, at last, I have found content. . . . You knew the secret,—sympathy,—that unlocks the gate of the magic garden of contentment. Money is a vast and splendid power; through no worth of mine wealth has come to me, will continue to pour upon me. In the last six months peace and a measure of joy have come too. What have the years brought to you, my beloved? . . . Yes, let me write the words and speak them as I write. None can take that from me,—the knowledge that you are the one beloved woman; and because I can never cease to love you, I plead with you once more,—not for love, not for pity, not even for forgiveness. Véronique,—let me do something for you; let me serve you; however humbly; let the ripples from some action of mine touch your life, however remotely. . . ."

She sat long over his letter; then turned to the one from Guy. It, too, was long. He wrote of his happiness in his marriage,—of his sorrow in the great grief that had been hers in the loss of her children, of the hope that he and his wife felt that the early bitterness of her bereavement was assuaged. "We talk of you often; you must try to come to us at Swarthe in the summer. For we leave this delightful and hospitable land next month,—

both Brenda and I desire our child to be born at Swarthe. . . . Brenda has heard so much of you, and we share your letters, so that she says she knows you and your friends and Beighlington already. . . . When we return, we must talk about getting your poems published . . . but that when we meet. . . ."

Veronica sat in reverie, the smile very tender in eyes and on folded lips. Then she rose and wrote swiftly:

"Dear Valentine,

"We are both winning through the tangle of our mistakes. . . . I know what you have done for Gertie. She writes often from Broadstairs of her progress and of the devotion you have inspired. I guess other things, and my fancy roves round your doings. Shall I then ask you to do something for me? Well, then, there is a big man with a big white soul who works in your foundry here. His name is Harry Bates. He is an inventor, handicapped by lack of money and indifference to his plans. He loves Jennie, and she him. Their happiness means much to me. Please help him in some quiet and unostentatious way,—so that apparently neither you nor I is responsible for his advancement. The details I will leave in your hands."

Her hand hovered over the page. Then she wrote hurriedly:

"Your letter has made me glad,—glad! Now, indeed, I am your friend,

"VÉRONIQUE."

She placed the sheet in the envelope, and ran through the snow to the pillar-box at the corner of the street.

That night she moved her belongings to the front bedroom, and went, gravely smiling, to an abashed and voluble Max, prodigal of apology and protestation of amendment.

CHAPTER VIII

ONE afternoon in September of the same year, Mrs. Quening mounted the long slope of Popplewell Street. She went slowly, and her pleasant face was beaded with sweat. The day was warm and she began to wish she had left her poplin mantle at home. Veronica, in a frock of tan-coloured linen, was tying up clumps of Michaelmas daisies in the patch of garden. She turned at the sound of the dragging step and ran quickly to her stepmother. She searched her face with anxious scrutiny, then drew her into the house and seated her on a couch.

"Mother, you're not well!" impetuously.

"All right—in—a minute, dearie," gasped Mrs. Quening. Veronica sped to the kitchen, dashed water upon brandy in a glass, and hastened back. The elder woman drank, and essayed to smile with blue, pinched lips.

A long silence fell. Then Veronica, seeing the colour begin to creep back to the pale cheeks, spoke softly.

"What is it, mother dear? Tell me!"

"Now, honey,—don't you fret. I don't rightly know. It's been a hot day and it's a bit of a climb."

"I know, I know. . . . I wish Max would move to Stepton Road, but he won't hear of it." She made a little, helpless gesture. "He can be frightfully stubborn."

"All men's that, lovey."

"Mother, tell me,—is father any better,—any easier to deal with? Max has not mentioned him to me for a long time, although I know he sees him occasionally. And I saw him, too, in the distance, one day last week. He looks strange, I think, much older, and with something wild about him,—more savage even than in the old days. . . . Are you afraid of him?"

"Me?—Why, no, dear!"

"Then you are ill. . . . You must see a doctor."

"Yes, perhaps I will, Ronnie. I have had a pain here," touching her breast lightly, "for some time. . . . And I worry about you,—I don't think you are happy."

Veronica turned confused eyes to her. For a moment she could not school her tongue to obedience. Then she answered hurriedly.

"Of course I am happy, mother dear! . . . Perfectly!"

"If you could only have another little one!" sighed Mrs. Quening.

Veronica gave a sharp cry.

"Oh, mother, I hope not," she said.

"Ah,—you only feel that way because you had all the pain and never knew no pleasure. . . . But you were made to be a mother, Ronnie."

"Don't, mother! . . . Has it never struck you that if we had a child,—a son,—Max would bring him up to be all German?" She clasped her hands agitatedly. "And I just couldn't bear it. He would take us away,—back to Germany,—he would go now only that he knows I would never, never accompany him. . . . But if we had a child,—how could I part with it?—I should have to go, —and then——"

"No, you could never part with your child, of course, ——"

"Well, then, mother, listen! I have two strong threads in my hands that hold Max to England. I believe he means to go to Germany eventually. But he will not go while there is any chance that I may be reconciled to my father, and, in time, benefit by the money that Max imagines he has accumulated; with that end in view he does not quarrel with me. . . . And the other is that I have no child,—there is nothing tangible to prevent my leaving him to-morrow."

Mrs. Quening gasped.

"Then don't you,—aren't you—living—with him, Ronnie?" she asked at last.

Suddenly, the girl's fortitude gave way. She fell on her knees and buried her face on that breast to which she had taken so many childish sorrows.

"Oh, mother, yes!" she cried. "That's just it,—for a long time we were separated, and then,—and then,—something happened that made me see quite clearly that I was not doing right,—that I was failing in my duty. . . . And I went back. . . . Things were better then; but I lied to you, mother, I *am* unhappy—desperately unhappy—and afraid. . . . If it were not for you—and Brian,—I would go away.——"

Mrs. Quening reached her black bag from the table and began to rummage in it. She collected a bundle of thin papers and laid them in Veronica's hands.

"Them's for you, honey."

"For me, mother?"

"There's two hundred pounds there, Ronnie,—and it's my own. You can take it without doing violence to how you feel about your father's money. I've come a-purpose to give it you to-day. There'll come a day when you'll want it, mebbe,—at any rate, you're to go to no Germany, among all them foreigners. You remember my words, Ronnie, and act on 'em same as if they were the last I ever spoke to you. Lock them notes up, somewhere safe, and you'll be independent of Max. When the worst comes, you up and go,—out on your own. I don't sleep very well lately, and sometimes at night it appears to me that I can see into a future; there's storm and conflict raging, but you are safe. . . . Follow your own brain and heart,—they'll guide you right."

Veronica dashed the tears from her eyes.

"They played me so sorry a trick that I don't think I can trust them, mother."

"Oh, yes, you can . . . I see you in years to come, —not in Popplewell Street, nor yet in Beighlington,— nor yet mebbe in England,——"

"Oh, mother, who is the dreamer now?" But smiles came back to her lips and her heart was lighter.

"If you would stay here altogether, mother!" she whispered, clinging to her, before walking with her to the foot of Burling Lane.

"Just think of me as always with you, Ronnie, my daughter, watching over you——"

Veronica never saw her again. Sudden heart failure, intense pain bravely borne, and she learnt later from Mrs. Dixon and Jennie, summoned hastily by the nurseryman from their sleep that night, difficult, whispered words that they knew to be messages of love to the girl who had been as her own child,—and her gentle soul went cleanly forth to meet its God. Max, mood subdued, hastened readily enough to George Quening's side. But Veronica sat with Brian, and once more mourned her dead.

Six months later, when another Spring was breaking like a green wave in foam of cherry blossom over the gardens about Beighlington, George Quening died by his own hand.

Of his life during those months left to his own bitter thoughts, his intense loneliness, little was known. Only Ellen, the frightened servant, scared faces of Veronica and Mrs. Dixon and Jennie,—a bride of three months— about her in the little dining-room in Popplewell Street, told of strange doings; of midnight roaming about the garden, of a low voice muttering, muttering, in the silence of dawn, of scores of empty whiskey bottles found in the billiard-room cupboard, hidden behind tattered copies of books and old magazines,——"—and I nivver seed him take a drop, all t' time I wor theer," said Ellen, with a sort of unwilling admiration for anything contrived in such successful secrecy.

Veronica felt sick, and fear struck chilly to her heart.

"Poison, wasn't it?" asked Jennie, timorously.

"Ay,—summat same as Veronica, t' name wor.—Veronial, that's it!"

"Now, that's enough, Ellen," bade Mrs. Dixon, briskly. "You keep yersen quiet, Jennie, and don't think about it, there's a good lass. . . . Got to be careful at about t' three month," in an explanatory aside to Ellen. "Now, my dear, go up i' t' chamber with Ronnie, and get yersens ready. You're both coming home wi' me to your tea,—there's a letter from our Gertie, and, gosh! it's wrote that fine I can 'ardlings read it. Go on now! . . . And now, Elling," drawing a chair towards where the servant sat in conscious superiority, "what wor he like when you found 'im? I once saw a body drowned;—swole and purple, I reckon, eh?"

Ellen, nothing loth, launched into details. "E-e-h," she said at last, "—an' there's summat I'm nigh forgettin'. T' night afore, he give me this 'ere ongvylup, an' says 'e, 'Go up to Veronica's to-morrow, and gi'e 'er this into 'er awn 'ands.' . . . Well, this morning I found 'im as I wor tellin' you. . . . Lucky, Biggs had comed. . . Natcherly, I 'ollered a bit . . . Then I remembered this 'ere letter. Thinks I, 'We want no Corryners axin' for this at t' inques'.' So I slipped it in me pocket and fotched it along."

Veronica came into the room. A vast pity had paled her cheeks. The picture of that lonely figure wandering the garden ways held her in a passion of sympathy. There was something deprecating, wistful about her as she took the letter that Ellen proffered and ran with it upstairs. She would read it when she was alone . . . and understand. Already she forgave. . . . A splash of tears fell upon it and the bundle of notes on which she laid it in her desk, as she stood there, sadness and pain and wonder in her eyes.

Sunshine and the melody of birds were flooding the lit-

tle bedroom when Veronica re-entered it and locked the door. Max was still at the house in Burling Lane. Mr. Dixon had gone there too, from his work. She would be alone and undisturbed. She looked round the familiar small room, hung with rough bookshelves. There were bright cretonne curtains at the window. They swayed in the light breeze and the blithe flowers on them rioted and danced. She stood thoughtfully, taking in all the details about her. There on the narrow bed was the blue eiderdown quilt that had been spread above her when she slept the calm, pure sleep of girlhood in the old home under the shoulder of the moor. A long shudder ran through her as she thought of what lay now in the room next the one that had been hers,—on the bed where she had been born,—where her mother had died. . . . She saw that ravaged face, calm now, and still, the bitter mouth set in lines of peace. Had that strange fierce religion strengthened him at the end, the awful end? Her vivid fancy played round the hands lifting the fatal bottle,—shaking out the pellets like dice,—faltering, then, with quick decision, hazarding the last great throw of all. . . . She unlocked the drawer, lifted the packet, and sat down to read.

There were two enclosures. One was a copy of a will made on a form to be bought at any stationer's for sixpence.

"I give and bequeath all money and property whatsoever of which I am possessed, unreservedly to Veronica Linders, wife of Maximilian Linders, formerly known as Veronica Quening."

She read it twice over; it was curiously worded. Unnecessary, too, a will at all. She was his only child, his heir-at-law. However, there it was, signed, and duly witnessed by Jeremiah Biggs and Ellen Atkins. She laid it aside with a tender hand. So he had repented of the wrong he had done her; this was his reparation. "Oh, I was hard and cruel," she whispered. "I wish, how I wish,

that I had gone to him as Max so often desired!" She began to think kindly, too, of her husband,—persuading herself that he had pleaded for reconciliation not from mercenary motives alone. . . . Still, he would be pleased. Now perhaps she might dissuade him from his plans for again making his home in his native land. . . . She had hardened her heart against her father,—perhaps she had treated her husband unfairly too. . . . She roused herself and unfolded the other papers. There were several, foolscap-size, pinned together, numbered. The opening words were abrupt. She read them with a faint, dawning fear.

"I am tired of life and mean to end it. It has bested me at last, as I always knew it would, ever since she died, —how long?—more than twenty-five years ago, when you were born. Did you guess you were none of my begetting? I think you did, years ago. Anyhow, we hated each other, —I hate you still."

Veronica brushed her hand across her eyes. No, she was not dreaming! She had been right all along,—he was not her father! Thank God! Where was now her pity? Something burned inside her. . . . Pity had been soft, like a flower stirred by wind. This was something fierce that burned. It was hatred. Yes, he was right, they had hated each other. He hated her still, mocking across the waste of death. She read on. . . .

"Your father was the only son of Lord Swarthe, my old master in Oxfordshire. May we meet in hell, where my hands sent him! Your mother was a housemaid at The Court, where I was gardener. She used to come about the gardens and I loved her. Then he noticed her and she did not come any more to ask me for a bunch of flowers. I used to see them sometimes going secretly to the beech-woods,—and I bided my time. His lordship was wrapped up in his books; he saw nothing."

Swift pictures swirled through her brain. The library at Swarthe with its rich familiarity; the splendid figure

of the old Earl. He was her grandfather. And then the face of Harry,—her father,—looked out in laughter from the hidden panel of the wall. Her father! Her boy father! . . . Lord Swarthe had known it, that day when he had shown her the portrait! Her own father! It seemed as if she had always known it, always; known, as she gazed first over those fair lawns and terraces,—known, ah! yes, most surely known when something deep and secret had whispered to her the day she entered the library and saw the grey drizzle of rain falling across the windows, gold-curtained in the dancing fire-light. . . . She sighed and bent her head again to the page.

"At last a day came when I followed them to the woods —and knew their secret. I lay there long, hid. After a while he mounted his horse and rode onwards, and she fled home through the meadows. He rode with loose rein, and as I watched him, he took a book out of his pocket and read. As he passed where I was lying he was smiling. Smiling! God! Suddenly on the hill behind us someone fired a shot. His beast, startled by the sound leapt forward. In another minute I saw him lying on the ground, and the animal galloping swiftly on. I ran towards him, my thoughts in commotion. A low limb of a tree had struck him on the brow. He was unconscious. The Lord had delivered mine enemy into the hollow of my hand. I searched and I found a heavy branch, and struck him where the livid bruise spoiled the whiteness of his brow. A few minutes and he was dead. I remember laughing as I went away."

Horror now in her eyes instead of dreams,—horror and loathing. Was it true? . . . Oh, God! Could it be true? . . . Then with a murderer she had broken bread for years,—beside a murderer her stepmother had lain. . . . Then came the thought of her own mother——. She read on.

"Soon they found him and brought him home. I was never questioned; no one was suspected; it was an accident.

He was buried and the weeks passed by. Then the housekeeper made a discovery,—there was scandal round the dead lord's name. A housemaid had come weeping,—had told a tale,—it was your mother. His lordship sent for me. He talked to me in confidence, entrusted me with a secret. His dead son's name must be protected, the girl was pretty; it was said I had a liking for her. If I married her and held my tongue, there was a thousand pounds waiting to set me up in business in another part of the country. The girl was willing, frightened but willing. I did as they bade, gladly. I looked for sons of my own begetting after the lordling's bastard was born." Veronica, wide-eyed, shuddered violently. "The rest you know,— she died when you were born. And I did not kill you, nor make an end of myself,—because she smiled at me and whispered to call you Veronica. And then she died, and I knew God had bested me. But I hugged the vision of revenge, and now it is mine. The years went on and the thousand pounds became four, five, six. Now it is yours, every penny. Oh, he has well played into my hands,—your worthless German husband! He will see that you take it. He and your children will spend the gold that hushed your father's murderer, and as you watch them finger the blood money, you will eat bread of ashes and drink the water of bitterness. That is my revenge! I always hated you,—your eyes, your mouth that smiled with his smile,—your hair like that of the bad women of all time,—God, I hate you still!"

It was finished. Motionless she sat; and still the pictures flashed, faded; swirled, receded. Suddenly, she saw her face in the glass, deathly white with blazing eyes, green as jade. She stretched out a trembling hand, as though she would seek to obliterate that mask of frozen rage, baffled hate. She seemed to see the sinister face of George Quening floating before her, awfully grimacing, gleeful, triumphant. Then it was gone and her father's mouth was smiling at her beside another gentle shadow,

pale and sad, yet faintly smiling too. She fell on her knees and buried her head in the blue eiderdown quilt. And then she wept; a storm of tears, scarring, agonising. An hour passed. She rose and went swiftly downstairs. She flung some pieces of paper into the kitchen grate, set them alight and pressed the folded sheets of the will and the diabolical revelation firmly upon them. The ready flames licked them, consumed them. But when they were black ashes, still they burned in her brain. . . .

At nine o'clock, Max returned. He came in smiling. She prepared his supper, a dreadful weight at her heart; watched him eat it, numbed yet cognisant still of the solecisms to which by now she should have been accustomed. He spoke little. Perhaps something dimly sensed in her frozen look, her strange, aloof manner, kept him dumb. When supper was ended, he lit a cigarette, and said,

"The inquest will be held to-morrow."

"Yes."

"I had a look through his papers—for you, dear. There will be a good bit of money,—some thousands. We might go into one of those houses you fancied on Stepton Road."

She stared at him and spoke dully.

"I thought you intended to go back to Germany." She could not keep the scorn from her voice.

"Now, Vera, you know I do not wish to do anything you would not like." There was something servile in his manner. But he seemed to find disquiet in the calm, cold face, and to be struggling to discover the reason for unfamiliarity apparent in the indifferent glance she turned on him. She wore a dress of the soft, deep blue of which she was so fond. The incongruity of it struck him. He smiled complacently, putting his hand into his pocket.

"You will want some money for—mourning," he suggested.

"Mourning?" Her smile stung him.

"Yes,—well! That is convenable, nicht?"

She continued to look at him oddly. He flushed, and began to speak rapidly.

"We shall be very comfortable, now; you were asking for a servant. I did not see my way clear then, but you shall have one now if you like."

She said nothing.

"Was giebt es?" he asked irritably. Still no answer from those proudly-set lips.

He went on disjointedly, protruding his jaw in the stubborn way she hated.

"Of course, all he left is yours in law. . . . You do not seem to wish to talk of it. It is too soon after his death, you think, perhaps. Ach, we are alone! . . . We can discuss how to apportion our increased income."

She moistened her lips.

"We shall not have one."

"Not——what?"

"There will be no increase in our income."

"Himmel! Don't I tell you? There are some thousands. The old villian was rich."

She answered very quietly.

"I do not mean to take the money."

"Not——what?" he said again, stupidly.

She made a movement of impatience, then checked it. She would make one last effort to draw him upward from the base motives of his life,—to set his unaccustomed feet to scale the wind-swept heights of moorland instead of to trudge the dusty streets. . . . She stood before him where he sat moodily, hands on knees, head thrust forward. Very gentle and desirable she looked in that moment.

"Max," she began. "Have I made you happy this last year,—since—since I—came back to you?"

He gave her a suspicious glance.

"Ach! That was your duty,—to which I might have forced you."

"Forced? . . . But I gave, Max! . . . Listen, I

will give you more, much, much more. . . . perhaps we shall have a child again——"

His eyes interrogated her face to which a warm colour had risen. She shook her head.

"Not yet! . . . but perhaps, some day! . . . Max, I will do anything you wish. . . . I do not mind about a servant or a better house or——Oh, Max! Don't you see I can't take this money?" She wound her arms about his neck, clinging to him. He shook them off.

"Can't what?" he asked roughly.

"I hated him . . . he tried to harm me. Yes, he would not have cared,—he would have laughed—if he could have made me—bad! How can I take his money?"

He laughed then, loudly.

"Ach, sentiment!" he blustered. "You English, it is your fetish. We have it not, Gott sei Dank! . . . What fools women are!"

"I will not take it," she interrupted, firmly.

He leaned towards her. His breath was hot, his eyes fierce.

"You will,—you devil!" he snarled. "Do you think I am going to be done out of the money now, when I remained friendly with him,—was insulted, ja wohl, many times, by his slighting references to my country, my Fatherland? And you say you will not take it. . . . So, my Vera,—we will see about that!"

"Nothing, nothing you can say will induce me to touch a penny of the money. My mind is made up. . . . Other things I will do, and keep my bond faithfully. I will give you all—all—that I am,—make you my first thought, submit to your commands, your pleasures, as you will. . . . Even, I will go to Germany with you if you desire,—ah, Max! Listen to me now,—give in to my fixed determination on this point, and I will yield to you on all others,—Max, my dear,—my husband!"

"You will yield to me, as you say,—and in this, too."

"No!"

He struck her then, but she did not move or cry out. Only, marble-pale her face turned, her hands gripped the folds of her gown. And soon he was on his knees, imploring. . . . The money would be so useful,—she need not herself use it,—he might start a small mill himself, or go into partnership with Rithofen and Mohr in Bradford. . . . Why was she so hard, so strange? . . . After a time his arguments ceased. She was adamant. To reach her was like trying to pierce a rock with a pencil made of putty. . . . And her talk of a child had roused his passion towards her, inflamed his desires. She was very beautiful. He would get this matter settled,—promise her the fulfilment of some of her longings,—they might go to Italy next year,—unless——

He got up and caught her by the arm.

"You will obey me, Vera!"

She only smiled, calling silently on those latent reserves of pride and fearlessness.

"No? . . . Then," threateningly, "I will make you."

"You, Max?" The words were a whip. Blood streaked his brow as though she had struck him.

"Yes, I! I am a dog, am I, to be cowed by your scorn? So be it. . . . Either you take the money,—the money that is your legal right,—or—I divorce you!"

"Divorce me? . . . You are mad!" Her thoughts flew to Valentine, never seen since her marriage; to the three letters she had received from him. "You are mad!" she repeated.

Little drops of moisture gleamed suddenly on the red-streaked brow. She saw his eyes, dark, with red flames in them. A dog's eyes, too, she thought, contemptuously. His face looked guilty, as though ignoble thoughts peered upwards,—again the apt word came to her brain,—hang-dog, his expression! She laughed cruelly, a third time.

"Ach, laugh, you——"

She stiffened at the word. Her laughter died.

"You are drunk," she said. "Mr. Quening evidently

left some full bottles as well as a hundred or so empty ones."

"I am not drunk," he answered, speaking slowly.

"No? . . . Then you are mad!"

"Am I?"

She drew in her breath sharply. His manner had altered suddenly. No longer he seemed a dog,—but a serpent, wily, sure of success.

"You are not very well acquainted with the English law," she said, mockingly. "You may perhaps find it difficult to prove my—unchastity,—especially with a man I have never seen since—you—trapped me into marriage." She spoke the last word with intense bitterness.

There was triumph in his reply.

"Well, you can choose between—marriage—with all the conditions I like to lay down,—all, I say,—or divorce."

"The divorce sounds more—amusing."

He winced, pierced through the thick armour of his conceit. But his eyes still held their gloating presage of victory.

"Would it be asking too much to enquire the name of the—co-respondent?" she asked with a sort of cruelly deliberate courtesy.

"Not at all!" he answered, taking a cue from her tone as though they were on the stage. "—His name is Mr. Brian Courage."

She saw it then, all the mean depth of his malice. She gave a sharp, involuntary cry, and stared at him; put her hands to her eyes with a rapid gesture, then let them fall again. Brian—Brian.!

"He was with you here,—alone,—let me see,—three times last week until very late,—four times the week before . . . a hundred times you have been alone together while the poor fool of a husband was mocked. . . . Sometimes I have found him here on my return,—sometimes

he has disappeared already. . . . Oh, my clever and beautiful Vera,—there will be no difficulty in securing evidence,—believe me."

She was silent, horror-stricken. This affront upon Brian? Impossible! Was it but an empty threat,—or did he mean to carry out the infamous plan unless she submitted to him,—her honour on the matter of the money, —her body,—and soul—on the altar of his desire? . . . She stole a glance at him. He looked triumphant. There was something keen, almost Hebraic, suddenly visible in his handsome, coarsening face. He looked like a cruel boy who had caught a bird he longed to torture. . . . Had he ever loved her? Was this still a dreadful travesty of love? . . . He was far, far beneath her, yet his cunning could trip her up. There must be some way out of what seemed an impasse,—to ruin Brian was inconceivable,—to drag their pure love through the divorce court unthinkable. . . . Her heart acknowledged this, even while it leaped for joy to think of him in such a connection. . . . Her lover? . . . He whose arms had never enclosed her, whose lips had never touched her own. . . . She looked again at her husband. A wicked smile lifted the corner of his lips.

"Choose, Vera," he whispered, showing his teeth, once white, now stained with tartar and tobacco. "Accept the money,—and my other demands,—perhaps I shall be lenient with my lovely wife if she gives herself dutifully to my embraces,—do this,—or I must regretfully instruct my solicitor to begin proceedings. . . . Mr. Courage can perhaps keep you in some other way; he will have to drop his schoolmastering, nicht?"

She stumbled blindly away, speechless. And as she went up the stair, a sudden wave of mortal sickness rose in her. She fell forward dizzily, rose shaken, and went on. She reached her room, locked and bolted the door. Again she faced the glass, saw her face pale as magnolia,

exquisite in its frame of red-gold hair, lighted by the glow of deep, blazing eyes. She swayed and the nausea caught her again. She sank upon a chair and buried her face in her hands. . . . She knew that she was again with child.

CHAPTER IX

THE hour of her weakness passed. Something upheld her from despair,—it was the knowledge of gallantry and pride inherited. Soon her thoughts ceased to dwell on husband or dead man. She was at Swarthe again, Swarthe shimmering under the veil of summer heat. The delphiniums were blue as tropic heavens in the long lawn borders, jasmine fell in cascade of white and green over the grey walls, bells of fuchsia and stars of geranium burned beneath them. To all that beauty of heritage Guy's son had been born. In the house, along the echoing galleries, the feet of his children would run. A spasm caught her throat. Where would her child be born? What its heritage? . . . She shook the thought aside, and pride rose victor again. Yes, she would win still! And the form of old Lord Swarthe, her grandfather, looking out kindly at her under his yellow-white hair, seemed to come out of the darkness and comfort her. And Guy? . . . He was her cousin,—old Mrs. Pooll, too, a distant connection. She thrilled at the thought of it. She began to idealise the dream-picture of her mother,—the well-remembered one of her father. Ah! They had meant to marry,—she was sure of it. No seducer he, with his splendid, vital face, his laughing, candid eyes. Yet he had wronged her mother deeply. But she thought of love, its mad driving-power, its disregard of consequences,—and a cloud of pity and love and understanding fell like a light veil over that picture of the unresisted passion of their long-perished youth. No, not perished! In the radiancy of that eternal youth they had gone out almost together, to greet the unknown,—the vast adventure of

Death. . . . She dared not think of Quening,—of how he had robbed her of father and mother,—lest she be tempted to curse the dead who had gone beyond her reach. She turned her thoughts resolutely again to Guy. Should she tell him all? . . . He had promised to befriend her, had kept his promise though she had consistently refused to see him since her marriage,—had gently refused to visit Swarthe after his child, a son, had been born in the preceding year, though her congratulations had been warm and tender. He would be willing, eager to help her. What then? Suppose she went to Swarthe and told him all. She could imagine his anger at some points, his pleasure at others of her recital. He would be happy in calling her kinswoman,—his wife, too, would be kindly disposed. They might ask her to stay with them awaiting the child, whose frail hands, had he known of its coming, would have been powerful enough to stay the proceedings her husband meditated. . . . For she never deceived herself into thinking he believed the accusation he had levelled against her. . . . She knew the depth of his malice, the extent of his mad jealousy. Knew too, that he had almost ceased to hope for a child since that first loss. . . . And she would hold her secret closely, guard it with all her skill. . . . And the proceedings for divorce would go on. . . . That Max had voiced his real intentions she had no doubt. . . . If he could not possess her utterly, and possess the money, too, that Quening had left,—he would take his revenge, crude and devilish, planned with characteristic German thoroughness. And a faint suspicion came to her that all this time she had been belittling his powers,—did not this strange cunning amount almost to cleverness, such a cleverness as George Quening, too, had possessed? And again, she fell to comparing the two men.

Far into the night she sat. When two o'clock struck from the clock of the Technical Institute, she had come

to her decision. Quite unmistakably she knew that she must have freedom. . . . Well, Brian would be ready, —for obloquy,—for ruin, at her lightest whispered word. And as surely as she knew this, she knew too, that it could never be. For very fully she realised that this must spell ruin for them. She visualised them in some mean street in London,—wretchedly poor, perhaps, but together! There was sweet as well as bitter in the picture. . . . That he was poor, she was certain. His earlier years had been crippled by the duty of supporting aged and feeble parents, only a few years dead. . . . Then there were the long months before the birth of her child to be considered. How was she to live? . . . Like a flash, she remembered the notes her stepmother had given to her on a day in the previous Autumn. A sob caught her throat, and wild blessing of that never-failing hand went voicelessly up. "Ah, she was my mother,—the other can never be anything but a faint chimera of imagination," she thought. Profoundly, she saw the hearts of those who had loved—and hated her, with a depth of insight never before accorded her. And as she passed them in review, as it were, she came upon the heart of Valentine Chamier. The voice of Destiny called her, and she heard it unafraid. Quite clearly she divined that here lay the solution to the difficulties that beset her,—here the key that unlocked Freedom's door.

Max should have his divorce; he should make Valentine the co-respondent. And it seemed to her that her father's face smiled.

This should be Chamier's expiation,—his atonement; innocent, as she,—yet to bear uncomplainingly the burden of guilty love. Something deep within her soul called across space to him; she knew he would reply. Brian should be left unscathed. Yet must he know her pure. The crucifixion of his suspicion she could not bear. Drawing a sheet of paper towards her, she wrote rapidly.

"My beloved,

"When you get this, I shall be gone. Do not be anxious about me. I am going to Valentine Chamier. I am going to trust him with more than my life. Max means to divorce me unless I accept the hateful money that Mr. Quening has left. You know well that this I can never stoop to do! I shall sign a deed of gift—there are some distant cousins in Leeds; I will find them out—I believe they are very poor. And my stepmother had a niece, delicate and a widow, with several children. She shall share it. Even bloodstained money—I speak literally here though I cannot explain my meaning now—might be purified in the innocent hands of children. . . . You can guess that Max's revenge involved you. He knows I love you, I think—it does not matter. Brian, your love has been a benediction to me all the years of my married life. Ah, dearest, I have my punishment now, —that I turned from you long ago,—knowing you loved me, reading it in your dear eyes, in the lips that would not speak. . . . I shall never marry; I am pure, my marriage vows unbroken, and my husband's child lies beneath my heart. . . . But I must end this degradation. I must have freedom, and I will not have it by the means Max has chosen. So I can see no other way. He will divorce me,—and Valentine will stand beside me,—not you, for I could not bear that all the world should mock at our love. Pray for me, dearest.

"Your Veronica."

So she wrote and laid down the pen. Then she changed her dress, packed a small bag, and left the house silently by the back way. She mingled with the stream of mill-workers going townwards to the factories in the unveiling sweetness of the early Springtime morn. That pursuit might be rendered difficult until her plans were accomplished facts, she booked at the station for Liverpool.

It was on a pale and delicate evening of April that Veronica reached London. A frail mist shrouded the

streets, floating about the green and amorphous plane-trees. Cries of violet sellers, and scent from their willow baskets came to her as the taxi carried her swiftly to Half Moon Street. The lure of Spring in the air, pedestrians responding to it with brisk steps and cheery faces, —and in the heart of Veronica a strange peace. This was not the London of her marriage week,—that dusty, lurid town. This was a fairy city, shimmering above the veils of mist. For the first time, London called to her, a stranger, soon to be a dear, familiar friend. She was smiling and unafraid when the wheels grated before the porticoed door that bore the number Valentine's last letter had given her. The panic that seized her in the train was gone. Life in Beighlington was over. The door of London had opened wide in welcome. . . . She rang the bell and waited.

Hyles came, and stared. Then, the mask of servitude descending, he answered her question. Mr. Chamier was for the moment out,—this was the afternoon of the début concert of Miss Dixon, the new contralto. But Mr. Chamier would be in in time to dress for dinner. Would madam return or wait? For answer, Veronica stepped into the hallway.

"Don't you remember me, Hyles? You saw me once before," she asked, gently.

The man reddened furiously.

"I thought—your hair—madam,—excuse me," he stammered.

"You do remember me then?" she asked again.

"Yes, madam."

"I am Mrs. Linders now, Hyles. Yes, that is my bag. Will you bring it in, please?"

He cleared his throat,—seemed about to speak. Then, lifting her bag in silence, he led the way to a small room whose window overlooked the street. It was a beautiful room, decorated in shades of purple. There was some-

thing mystic about it in the half-light; she caught her breath. Colour had always appealed to him,—as to her. And scent! There were violets again, the room was full of them, deep purple, palest mauve, massed in the old pewter bowls. Suddenly the thought of the front parlour in Popplewell Street, and passion shook her. How had she borne it all these years? She shivered, and the tears stung her eyes. The man-servant was staring at her again.

"It is so beautiful, Hyles!" she said, brokenly.

"Yes, ma'am."

He pulled a chair forward, and she sank into it. There was a small fire burning, and the fragrance of the pine-cones that were its fuel blended with the perfume of the violets and heightened the mystical beauty of the room.

"I will bring you some tea, ma'am."

She sat quietly until he returned with the delicate cups of Beleek and the sparkling silver. A smart maid followed, bearing toast and cakes. Hyles hovered about Veronica after the maid had disappeared. She smiled, and the dizzying sweetness of her glance made the leathery eyes of the man suddenly moist.

"Don't worry about it, Hyles! It is so long ago. . . . It doesn't matter now."

"Oh, ma'am!" His voice broke in confusion.

"It is over,—long over! Of course you obeyed your master. That was your duty, I suppose. . . .But oh, Hyles,—if you had told the truth that night,—you would have spared me so much."

He bent his head to her soft rebuke.

"You have suffered, ma'am?" he asked, humbly "—And so have I! . . . Can you ever forgive me, ma'am?"

"Poor Hyles!" she said, softly. "I never blamed you. If forgiveness were needed, you had it long ago."

She held out her hand, from which she had stripped the long grey glove.

"Perhaps you can serve me still!" she said.

He bowed his head; his face was scorched with shame.

He touched her hand for a moment, reverently; then let it fall. A faint commotion was evident in the hall.

"My master!" the man said, suddenly erect. "I will acquaint him of madam's arrival."

Valentine opened the door and came in. Across the space of five years they looked at each other.

Excitement had lent again to him the boyish aspect that he had lost for a while in the first bitter months of their separation. She saw again the fair, almost silver hair, the upward-springing line of darker brow, noted the lines at the corners of the blue eyes, steady now and shining with eagerness,—the added self-control of the beautiful mouth. He saw the slender figure that he loved dressed in the severe costume of pale-grey that was yet not quite enough to render her great beauty inconspicuous, —the blaze of hair beneath the wide black hat,—the eyes, —the eyes that he had dreamt of as burning and hostile, —kind and clear and deeply green behind the upcurved eyelashes. He drew a breath sharply. She was lovelier than ever. He went swiftly forward and his arms enwrapped her.

"Véronique!" he whispered, his voice shaking.

She disengaged herself gently.

"Forgive me," he said. "Of course, I have no right to touch you."

She took his hands and held them closely. In her eyes was the look that he had loved, something exquisite, half-childish, half-maternal. His ardour died; friendship flashed upward. He followed her to a low couch and they sat down together.

Swiftly she told him all, concealing only the identity of her father, which Quening's letter had revealed to her. He listened in silence.

"You are putting a heavy burden upon me, Véronique," he said, when she had finished. "You know I love you still."

"That is why I trust you," she answered, simply.

He got up abruptly, and moved to the window. She followed him with her eyes, and now he saw that they were sad eyes,—the eyes of the Madonna who had wept. He came swiftly back to her and fell on his knees, hiding his face in the folds of her grey dress.

"I am yours. Do with me what you will!" he murmured, brokenly. She stooped and kissed his forehead and tears rushed to her eyes. She too, had hazarded, and won.

They talked long and earnestly, and soon the eagerness of planning, subtle planning that should be successful accomplishment, had quenched for a time the flame of passion in the man.

"You think he will really divorce you, Véronique? It is not merely a threat."

"I am sure he will,—when he knows I have definitely refused the money, and am with you."

"You know you must stay here, sleep here," he said, with a sudden change of tone.

"Yes," she answered, softly.

"And you trust me so far," he said, wonderingly, "—after——?"

She caught his hand.

"Hush!" she said. Then, after a pause, "I know I am getting freedom on false pretences to the world, but I cannot be false to my own ideals. . . . Nor can you," she added.

His eyes worshipped her.

"I can rise with you," he said. Then, wryly, looking at her whimsically, " 'How easy a thing it is for a man to put off from him all turbulent adventitious imaginations, and presently to be in perfect rest and tranquillity,' " he quoted.

She smiled.

"No, it isn't easy," she said. "But you can do it, Valentine."

For a moment he almost lost control. Then, "Yes, by God, I can!" he exclaimed fiercely. After a while, more quietly, "But will your husband accept—this—this change of—opponent?" he asked.

She looked at him fully.

"You are rich!" she said, meaningly.

"Ah, yes, I understand. He will go for damages now. . . . Good!" And the light of battle came again to his eye.

"He has a horrible love of money," she said, speaking thoughtfully.

"Yes. . . . Do you remember how I wanted it once?"

"And now it is yours, almost unlimited."

"And yours, Véronique!"

She shook her head.

"I have sufficient for my needs," she said. "I must not take yours."

"What!" he exclaimed, aghast. Then, roughly, "What do you call sufficient?"

"I have two hundred pounds."

"Tcha! . . . It will not keep you six months in London."

She answered gently, but with finality.

"It must keep me for a year." And then she told him of the child she hoped for.

"God, Veronica!" he said, bluntly. "I cannot have you starving. You must take some of my money,—why, Gertie,—and Bates and his wife (though they don't know, I admit),——"

"They are different."

"How different?" He spoke impatiently.

"Listen, Valentine! . . . I am going to find some quiet rooms,—in the country, somewhere, until the divorce is completed, and my baby is born. . . . But Max must never guess that it is his child. If he did, he would drop—all this. . . . So, somehow, we must conceal the

date of its birth as far as possible. But, in case he should suspect, I want you—and perhaps Hyles——" She paused, and her lips trembled.

"I understand!" He was deeply moved. "I was in Beighlington six weeks ago," he said, brusquely, "and Hyles was with me. He would swear you came to Slingsby House then,—will that do?" abruptly.

She looked her thanks and in a while the cloud of difficulty and restraint passed, and they smiled again into each other's eyes.

"And afterwards?" he asked, when dinner was finished and they lingered over coffee and Russian cigarettes, the Sybarite in each uppermost.

"I can teach again. . . . And I have written a good deal lately. Perhaps I might get something accepted."

He nodded.

"Where do you think of staying—meantime?" he asked, watching the sweep of her hair and lovely curve of cheek against the rich purple of her velvet chair.

"Somewhere in Oxfordshire, perhaps. There are some dear little villages near Sinodun. I was in College there, you know."

"I know a fellow who has a place thereabouts,—Lord Swarthe," he said.

She started slightly; for she had never talked to Valentine of Guy. Nor had she broached the subject of their connection, meaning, under the hovering cloud of circumstance that must appear to the world as guilt, to hold it secret. But now she must admit acquaintance.

"I know him too," she said. "I used to go to see Mrs. Pooll sometimes,—she was a patroness of the College."

"Do you? Why, how jolly! Do you know his wife?"

"No,—and I have not seen him for years."

"You must renew your acquaintance."

"I cannot do so now," she said.

He considered that gloomily for a moment.

"No, by Jove!" he said, at last. "You are burning your

boats with a vengeance! . . . Look here, Véronique, darling,—marry me when all this rotten business is through! . . . People soon forget,—and no one should slight you. . . . But, divorcée,—and the co-respondent without the decency to marry you afterwards! . . . Why, it seems beastly!"

She looked at him steadily.

"Do *you* mind, Valentine?"

"For myself, of course not! But you——" Bitterness and tenderness were in his voice. "What a life for you! . . . And if you are serious in meaning to take no money——"

"Quite serious, Valentine, dear."

He was silent.

"I cannot marry you—or anybody," she said, gently. "I want you to understand that thoroughly. I shall not consider myself free."

"Then why all this—masquerade?"

She turned on him almost fiercely.

"Because I shall be free in the eyes of everybody else," she said. "And my child will be my own,—all mine, only mine! . . . Perhaps no man can understand all that that may mean to a woman! . . . To bring my baby up as I choose,—to have all its love, to bear all the sweet care,—no more loneliness—or regret——!" She paused; then the tears, long delayed, came swiftly to ease her overwrought spirit.

Before the Autumn days had burned away in flame of gold and red in the woods about Sinodun, Veronica was free. She had been found guilty of misconduct with the co-respondent, the wealthy man about town, Valentine Chamier,—the evidence of whose man-servant, Hyles, was reckoned particularly damning,—and solatium to the amount of two thousand pounds was awarded to assuage the feelings of the wounded and betrayed husband. In November her child was born, opening night-black eyes

upon a little world hung at the edge of the downs, a quaint old village, whose quiet grey beauty had soothed to complete peace the heart that had been bruised in long suffering. There the months sped with rain and shadow and sun and lightly-falling snow until Spring broke again in magic over England.

CHAPTER X

IT was May. The tidings had been brought by thrush and swift and flashing starling to all the orchards and gardens round Belbury-on-the-Down, and, startled, they hung out their banners of joy. Laburnum and lilac uncurled their strips of beaded embroidery, guelder roses puffed up their snowballs on the trees. Wings of iris unfurled between the pointed spears of their leaves, and gay butterflies hovered about their brilliant beauty.

Veronica came slowly between the blossoming pinks down the flagged pathway from the door of the thatched cottage that had been her home for nearly a year. She wore a white dress and a broad white hat with a blue ribbon. At the gate she turned and smiled towards an upper window where a motherly, lined face appeared bending over a cot. The casement was opened widely, and the muslin frills of the tiny bed were fluttering in the soft breeze. Veronica turned again and passed on down the village street. Often she had to pause to answer some kindly greeting; sometimes a child ran towards her; then, invariably, she stopped and wrapped it for a moment in tender arms.

She came to the green with its ancient cross. There were more children sitting on the steps. They waved small hands in greeting, and she shook her sunshade gaily in response. The carrier's cart was drawn up almost to the door of the Swan Inn, in whose great stables a hundred horses had long ago been daily changed, and the bare windows of whose twenty empty and echoing bedrooms looked rebukefully down on the old white horse and grey-tilted cart.

"Good morning, Greenaway."

"Whoy, good marnin' to 'ee, ma'am. Be going to Oxford to-day, ma'am?"

"Yes, please."

"Ah, time be ye nad some bit o' change. Sarah, she be only saying to me yestiddy that wor, or Thursd'y 'ap'n, that ye needed a bit outin' steddy stoppin' in this li'l ole place all yer days."

"I haven't much money for excursions. . . . I'm going to look for work to-day."

The old man regarded her thoughtfully; then, apparently examining the delicate antennae from the blowing butterflies of red and white chestnut blossom that were thick about their feet, murmured an expressive "Ah-h!"

She climbed into the vehicle, he assisting her as gallantly as if he had been a courtier and she a lady in brocade and hoop of a hundred years ago.

"'Ow be li'l missie?" he asked after they had wound slowly down the long hill-road that drooped towards the Thames.

The passenger's eyes shone happily. "Whoy, her be nuthin' but a slip of a girl herself," thought Greenaway, admiringly.

"Oh, she's getting on beautifully; so strong and straight with this lovely country air."

At a distance from the bridge she checked the driver and alighted. The tower of Magdalen called to her to linger; about her were the spires round which the love-songs of poets of all time had been wreathed. Instantly she was lifted into the magic of the city that ever remained to her the dearest in the world. She tried to recall the lines she had once written to Brian after that first visit years ago. They eluded her; floated, half-recaptured, were lost again as she wandered dreamfully on. She found herself in the green tunnel of the Broad Walk and so went on to the "Fayre Gate" and under ancient Tom into the great quadrangle. She thought of

Valentine, tenderly. She had not seen him for some months. How often his feet had pressed these historic stones! She heard his gay voice now, speaking affectionately of "The House." She went under the beautiful archway, and passed into the still and perfect loveliness of the Cathedral. Suddenly, the lines she had been striving to recall rushed into her memory:—

"Frost-fingers etched thy traceries, snow-sprites thy columns reared,
And through thy painted windows the Day-god's chariot steered;
Wild whirlwinds wrought each spiral, swift rains those arches curved,
To pierce thy turrets' slimness the jagged lightning swerved. . . ."

"I must write that up again," she thought, "or ask Brian to send it to me."

Then out beneath Tom Tower again, and swiftly passing along Cornmarket, she reached Magdalen Street.

When she came upon a blouse shop, window richly bare with its three exquisite blouses and length of filmy lace thrown negligently upon a black oak coffer against a background of subtle blue velvet, she halted, glancing at the gilded "Lucie" that meandered above the door. She lingered, beating down the nervousness that rose in her. Then she pushed open the door and entered.

A smiling forewoman came up. What could she have the pleasure——?

"I am looking for work," said Veronica simply.

"Oh!" came the cold reply. "Miss Lucie is engaged," waving a painfully-manicured hand towards a grey-haired, stately woman who stood in converse with another, vivacious and richly dressed, evidently a wealthy customer. "Wait there, near that screen, a few moments."

Veronica obeyed quietly. The shop was spacious, white, and very clean. There were Louis Seize chairs and settees and several small tables on most of which a lace coatee, a feather ruffle, a delicately pale evening wrap had been cast, apparently, with hurried grace. Miss Lucie came slowly over the space of blue velvet carpet,

escorting the solitary customer. Veronica saw that the latter was small and dark, with a richly coloured skin like the heart of a damask rose, and a swift, seductive grace of movement. She watched her admiringly. Suddenly the other caught her glance, stared, essayed to go forward, hesitated again, then stopped abruptly before her.

"You are Veronica!" she said, quite suddenly.

Veronica rose and her colour ebbed. Her affirmative was barely whispered, but the other caught it.

"I am Brenda Swarthe," she said, laying a small hand on the girl's arm. "My car is outside—and Guy,—or should be in a minute. . . . Will you come?"

They passed out together and the door swung noiselessly shut upon a pair of astonished women in the solitariness of the blue and white and spotless shop.

A low grey car stood against the curb. In it a man with grey suit and quiet gray eyes sat. He turned and saw a flash of bright hair under a sweeping-brimmed hat, a brilliant face, rose-flushed, gemmed by sparkling eyes.

"Veronica!" he exclaimed, and there was a great gladness in his voice. He leapt out, handed the women in, sprang in after them, leaned to the chauffeur. The grey car swung out and glided swiftly towards Magdalen Bridge.

"There!" said Lady Swarthe, triumphantly. "You talk about inserting advertisements in all the London and provincial papers, employing detectives and secret service men or whatever they are called, to hunt up the lost Veronica. . . . Pour moi, I go to buy a pair of gloves or a scarf or whatnot,—whisk round, and voilà! lay my hand upon the missing one."

Veronica turned bewildered eyes upon the pair.

"But how did you know her?" asked Guy, laughing:

"Know her, dit-il? . . . Have I not drunk my coffee for the last two years—with intervals—beneath the eyes

of the fair, and, if report speaks truly, the frisky Lady Anne? And did you not tell me that Veronica was Anne with the loveliness resurrected and the foibles and faiblesses left in the grave?' She went on rather hurriedly, conscious that she had skated over thin ice. "*Of course* I knew her, and hailed her immediately as our long-lost cousin."

"Cousin?" exclaimed Veronica, more than ever mystified. "Then you know?"

"Of course we know. . . . Do you?"

"Yes!" she admitted, shyly.

"Well!" expressively. "However, don't say another word about it until we reach home."

"Home? . . . Are we going to Swarthe?" asked Veronica, wistfully. Then, blushing faintly, "I cannot stay long. . . . I—I have a small girlie only six months old awaiting me at Belbury."

"At Belbury? Have you then been so near to us and not come nearer still?" asked Guy, reproachfully.

Her eyes filled with tears.

"I—I did not know—what——" she faltered.

Lady Swarthe broke in.

"Of course, Guy Fawkes, she couldn't be dashing about the country with a six-months-old baby," she said; adding to herself, "I wonder why he hasn't married her yet!" She cast a sympathetic glance at Veronica, and marked how nobly she bore herself, with what proud grace she had spoken of her baby.

"You know mine's a boy, don't you?" she said, touching Veronica's hand. "Our little Dundas,—just two years old now. . . . Just right for your little girlie! . . . I believe in arranging such matters early," she added, quaintly. "There! I made a rhyme then. Did you notice, Guido?"

"Here we are! Welcome to the Court again, Veronica! How surprised Mrs. Pooll will be!" said Guy, as they drew up at the well-remembered portico. And then the

door rolled silently back, and there stood Slidd, almost middle-aged beside the much younger second footman on duty, and in the background, Mr. Bunt, more majestic than ever.

They remembered her! She thrilled to the look of affection that Bunt, after a startled second of indecision, gave her. As for Slidd, he had disappeared with a celerity totally undignified, to return a moment later in the wake of a fluttering Mrs. Pooll, who, the next instant was crying on Veronica's shoulder. Oh, this was welcome! . . . Her throat swelled; she made an intense effort to speak; failed. Then Lady Swarthe had swept her away, and the noice of Bunt came to her from a great distance,

"Luncheon in fifteen minutes, my lady!"

"Now, not a word until we have fed," peremptorily ordered Lady Swarthe, when a few minutes later they came down. "It's my discovery, and I'm going to set the stage and give directions from O.P."

At which Veronica was more mystified than ever.

Luncheon, laid in the Octagon room, was a merry affair, in spite of tears furtively wiped away from time to time by Mrs. Pooll.

"Now, you smoke a cigarette by yourself, auntie," said Brenda, laughing, "and we conspirators will go into the library, and Guy here will unfold the plot." She settled the old lady comfortably, handed her her knitting and spectacles, and taking Veronica by the hand, tiptoed out with a guilty air.

The dear remembered room was full of the golden glow of May sunlight. It fell warmly on the rich mahogany, the mellow bindings of many books. Veronica's eyes instantly sought the panel behind which her father's eyes laughed. There was a lump in her throat as memory bridged the years. . . . She was a radiant girl again, just stepping from her teens into the wonder and glory and fullness of life. She wore an ill-cut silk blouse of old-fashioned shape and a skirt that sagged a little at

the sides. She was looking up into the eyes of an old man, a tall, splendid man, and he was speaking in a low voice. "Just now, I have learnt what is the greatest mistake one can make in life. It is to have missed a love one might have had,—to regret a joy foregone by one's own action." . . . She shook herself free of the vision; the tall figure faded; instead, she was looking into Guy's kind eyes, and Brenda's light touch was on her arm.

"I found this, yesterday," Lady Swarthe was saying. "Only yesterday! It had been mouldering in this stodgy old book that nobody ever thought of opening, for years."

Then she, still in a dream, it seemed, was reading from a paper scrawled by the wavering hand of age.

"I acknowledge Veronica Quening, of Beighlington, Yorkshire, as my granddaughter, the child of my dear and only son, Harry, Lord Rosyn, and by this acknowledgment I make tardy reparation of my long neglect. I give and bequeath to my granddaughter, the aforementioned Veronica Quening, the sum of thirty thousand pounds as well as the villa at Versailles known as Villa Florian, with all its contents."

Underneath the bold signature, the letters of the name of William Bunt stood out squarely above the running hand of Herbert Slidd. The paper fell to the floor and Veronica was gazing dazedly at her companions.

"It's all right now. . . . Don't give way," murmured Brenda, anxiously. "Bunt and Slidd remembered it all perfectly—perfectly. There was some stupid idea that the paper had been destroyed, and the room was never searched. . . . Last night, I thought I'd read something about Baby Dundy's funny old ancestors,—and this dropped out of the book. . . . Excited! . . . Well,—was I excited, Guy?"

"We both were, I think," smiled Lord Swarthe.

"Well, you had disappeared. It seemed that since the —since last year you had not been heard of. We didn't know how to begin looking for you. . . . Guy always said

you would write some day. Meanwhile, we knew you had not mar—I mean you might be starving for all we knew, so we decided that Guy should go to Town to-day and hunt up Valentine Chamier,—(Oh, yes, I may as well speak out!) and find out if he knew where you were . . . If that failed, he was going on to Beighlington to see your friend Jennie. . . . I went as far as Oxford with him as I wanted to do some shopping. . . . The rest you know! Now, can't you tell us something,—cousin Veronica?"

Veronica's heart suddenly brimmed with love for these two, eager in their welcome, ignoring the unsavoury subject of the divorce. She sketched the sinister form of George Quening; touched lightly on her innocent love for Valentine, and hinted of its ending; whispered something of her married life and its disillusions; dwelt on Brian's devotion and her refusal to sacrifice him on the altar of her husband's jealousy and greed; brushed in with few yet vivid strokes the path she had followed to Valentine and divorce; briefly outlined their innocent parting,—his high chivalry; painted in warm tones of mother-love the joyful months at Belbury, since the coming of little Deirdre,—reading, writing, ever writing. . . . They listened, absorbed, enthralled by the simplicity and clarity of her story. Brenda's eyes were full of tears when Veronica ceased speaking. Flinging her arms round her waist, she kissed her warmly.

"You sweet thing!" she whispered. "Now come and see my baby. . . . And to-morrow, I shall bring the car to Belbury, and you and—Deirdre, is it?—shall come straight back here until Guy gets all this money business arranged for you. . . . Meantime, Deirdre and Dunda can be getting to know each other," she finished with her flashing smile.

* * * * * * *

Three years later, on a brilliant day in August, a slender woman, exquisitely dressed, regally lovely, sat in

a hired car and looked out on the press of traffic in Bond Street, which was considerable, though London was fashionably empty. Beside her, a child with dark eyes and curling dusky hair, gazed about interestedly. She chattered incessantly in rapid baby French, and the woman smiled often. A great happiness filled her eyes, though they were wistful, too, with a deep and moving pity, for these were the days when young war had bayed its first sombre notes over a startled world.

Suddenly, a man, walking rapidly, paused, gave a quick gasp and sprang forward. He was a man whose coarsened face held traces of a great beauty, but war had raged too in his features and scarred them remorselessly.

"Vera!" he cried, laying his hand on the edge of the open car.

Her eyes, widely opened, strained, met his.

"Max!" she whispered.

"Let me get in!" he begged, and there was something piteous in tone.

Almost without volition, she nodded. The child, perturbed by this sudden intrusion, placed a rosy finger between her lips. Her dark eyes slowly filled with tears and her mouth drooped. The man gazed at her long and hungrily. The car, released, sped forward.

Veronica lifted the tube from its rest and gave an order. As she laid it down again, she watched her companion narrowly. There was kindness and a shade of fear in her expressive green eyes. They did not speak until the car drew up before a tiny house in Arkell Street. There were gay window-boxes brimming with lobelia on every ledge, the vivid blue very intense against the white paint.

"So you live in London?" he asked, staring round the room to which she led him. A servant appeared and took charge of the child, still tearfully inclined. He watched the light and lovely figure until it disappeared.

"Not usually. . . . My house is in Versailles,—but

I returned to England when war was declared. . . . This is merely a pied-à-terre. . . . I shall go to the country almost immediately." She had been longing to speak, yet now that the moment had come she found words difficult to find. "It is because I have lived in France so long," she thought, but she knew that was not the reason. She knew that the sight of this familiar, unfamiliar figure who had now no claim on her, no power over her, roused in her a vague sense almost of guilt. She did not sit down, but leaned lightly against the miniature grand piano. It was open and there was music on it,—something of Tschaikowsky. She saw his eyes go haggardly to it, and remembered that he had cared for it, often played it in the days that were long dead. . . . She moved restlessly. She was wearing a dress of an exquisite shade of hydrangea blue, beautifully made in the trying vogue of the day. Her throat, white and delicately modelled, rose from its laces proudly, and her small head with its coronet of bright hair was held superbly.

Suddenly she remembered that this man was of her country's foes. Her form stiffened and a hard look crept into her eyes. Contempt warred with pity in their depths.

"Did you marry him?" Linders asked at last.

"No."

"Anybody else?"

She hesitated a moment as though questioning his right to ask before she again answered "No."

"So you had deceived me? . . . How long? . . . You said you had never seen him since our marriage."

She shook her head slightly.

"He pays for this?"

She flushed angrily.

"No!" she said again.

He laughed dully. His eyes roved the room. On the pearl grey linen walls was one picture,—a Sargent. It was that of a child of about two years, a lovely child,

dark as a gipsy,—the child he had seen led away a short time ago. His gaze rested on it an instant, wavered, returned. She held her breath; prayed.

There was a long silence.

When he looked at her again the old cunning had crept back to his weary eyes. Their dark deeps were lit by a strange gleam. She was motionless, very pale.

"So that is—Chamier's child?" he asked.

She nodded.

"When was she born?" he went on.

She tried to lie; failed.

"In November of the year I—left you," she murmured faintly.

"So? . . ."

"I had been with—Valentine—at Slingsby House—one night in March." She made an attempt to rally her failing voice.

"Ach! . . . So—Hyles—said in court."

"Yes."

He strode forward and seized her wrist, crushing the jade bangle she wore deep into her flesh. The husky, guttural voice broke on her fear.

"You damned liar! . . . The child is mine!"

Terror filled her eyes. He was clever, diabolically clever. Why had she allowed him to get into the car? Fool,—fool,—not to have driven on, and left him impotent!

He began to speak again rapidly.

"You damned English!" he snarled. "So sure of yourselves,—so satisfied in your smug assumption of superiority. You and he are fair,—English fair both! Did you never hear of one of the strange laws of heredity? Children with black eyes are not born of light-haired and blue-eyed parents!"

It was one of the random shreds of knowledge, disconcerting in its unanswerable absurdity, that he had picked up in the Interesting Items column of some gaily-coloured weekly, and, with the humourless gravity of his

race had stored away in a cell of the brain that she had thought simple and now knew to be so deeply complex. She had lived with him for years and never known him, never pierced the arcana of his subtlety and patience. She saw him as something vast, menacing. He was Germany! A great fear caught her heart in icy fingers. . . . She strove to think of some evidence that would refute his assertion . . . but in all her knoweldge not an iota could she find to deny this trumpery scrap of his.

"My eyes are green,—perhaps that makes a difference." How she struggled to make her words lightly cynical!

He seemed to push the interjection aside.

"I can make you return to me," he said. "Claim the child!"

She went on her knees to him then, weeping, inarticulate, wholly lovely and desirable.

"Get up!" he said, roughly. "That is not the way to buy me off. . . . Why do you not call your servants and have me thrown into the street?"

She shook her head.

"I couldn't do that," she answered. Swiftly she raised her eyes to his, and searched his face. Something there must have given her courage, for she went on frankly, "You have the right,—she is yours!"

He did not answer, neither did any triumph show in his face. Perhaps in those moments he read in her stricken look some knowledge of the pain that all mothers of all times must bear. . . . He broke the tense silence.

"All this,—who does it?" he asked, moodily, waving a hand, ungloved, not over-clean, at the walls, the silver-laden tables, the soft carpet.

"No, man, Max," she answered, gently. "It is my own. I had some money left to me, and I have written a good deal these last years,—some poems,—a play." She named an outstanding success of the last winter.

He asked no further questions. Then something impelled her to offer the gift that he could not force. . . .

Afterwards, she never knew what strange power shaped the words that rose to her lips.

"I will come back to you if you wish it, Max. . . . The child is yours. . . . Perhaps I have been wrong."

Her sudden surrender seemed to stun him.

"You forget this—this war!" he muttered.

She started. An extraordinary feeling of penetration, of understanding came to her. She saw him as he was,—not husband, not father,—or rather, only these that he might serve the better. . . . She saw him German; a son of the Fatherland. . . .

She was silent. The minutes ticked away.

He got up heavily and took his hat. She watched him with her soul in her eyes.

He came and stood before her. Her heart beat wildly, yet it seeemd that for long moments she was breathless. Then she felt a swift reviving tide of life rush through her being. In the sombre eyes into which she gazed, she saw pity nascent.

"Keep your child, Vera," he said, quite quietly. "If he had been a son——! Never mind! Keep her! You are free. . . . You need not fear me. . . . Are you happy?"

She could not speak. He saw the dread die out of her wide glance, saw tenderness return.

"You have said it," he said, harshly. "Farewell! I think we shall not meet again."

Her hands went swiftly to his shoulders, and their lips met. He felt her against him, warm she seeemd and young and virginal. For a wild moment he dreamed that the years had never been, that but now he had won her,—and honourably. Then, while recollection came to him, to her came blinding tears. . . . When she looked up again, she was alone.

To her, long afterwards it seemed, though the glow of the evening sky had scarcely begun to dim to twilight, Valentine came. Strikingly erect, sure of himself in every

gesture, he paused in the doorway and looked across at her; he saw the humid eyes, their wistful gaze, the deep peace of her faintly-smiling mouth.

"What is it, Véronique?" he asked, going forward.

Quietly, she told him all. He listened, brow bent upon his hand. She finished.

"You took a big risk when you offered to return to him," he said at last.

"Yes! I don't know why it did not seem so at the moment. He is different, Valentine,—changed incredibly. And something prompted me. . . ."

"I know! . . ." He shook his shoulders as though he flung off a burden. "He has gone from your life now, at last, for ever."

"Yes, I feel that too."

Suddenly he took her hand and held it in his close firm clasp. Within him rose the flood of a great emotion, subdued through years of friendship, now suddenly breaking in storm. She looked up at his face, startled. The passionate tenderness that she saw there was more intimate than a caress.

"Now, at last, you are really free," he said, exultantly. "Will you marry me, Véronique?"

"Ah, no!" she protested, faintly. "Even now I do not feel free from our marriage bond."

"The law released you,—and now he has released you. . . . Yet you quibble in your mind still. . . . Veronica, I have loved you and have counted that love so holy that for it and the day when you would yield, I have been faithful for years." He spoke pleadingly yet proudly. "I am at your feet. Can you not take me to your arms,—my dear, my dear?"

"Oh, Valentine,—I can't, I can't ," she whispered.

He rallied from the blow.

"Véronique, do you love someone else?"

She raised her wet eyes, and he read his answer.

"Then I will not bother you again," he said simply.

"In a way I am glad to know,—I have always, deep down, thought you cared for Courage. . . . It is he, I suppose?"

She nodded slightly, and the red wave dyed her cheek. "My vow holds good for him too," she murmured. "I shall not marry."

Her face seemed to him to express all the renunciation of women through the ages. He felt very near to her at that moment.

"Dear," he said gently. "I am come to say 'Good-bye.' I am rejoining my old regiment immediately."

She sprang to her feet, speechless, amazed.

"No, do not trouble,—you are not responsible for my decision," he soothed. "I made up my mind some time ago. You see there is nothing—any more for me." His still, blue eyes seemed to search the dimly-presaged future. "And I love soldiering, you know."

"I am glad that you are going, Valentine," was all she said. Her heart was very full. Once again her eyes renounced, and this time her renunciation was the gage he joyfully accepted and set upon his memory that so he might see her, gracious and exquisite through the dreary months to come.

CHAPTER XI

A TELEGRAM two days later took Veronica to Swarthe Court.

"I want you to come at once, if possible," Brenda had wired. "There is no cause for alarm."

Nevertheless, Veronica questioned the chauffeur anxiously as she stepped into the car. Neither Brenda nor Guy was at the station, and the man could only say that all were well and as far as he was aware nothing the matter.

"It always sets my teeth on edge to enter Oxford this way," she thought, whimsically. So she talked to Barton until they reached Carfax and turned out along the well-remembered road. As they sped along a faint fear accompanied her. But the first sight of the house, partly veiled in already incarnadined Virginia creeper,—warm grey, very peaceful, stilled it suddenly. The motor glided forward, came to a standstill. Guy was there, waiting to help her. She saw Brenda on the lower lawn in the blue gloom of the cedar trees. Two children, a sturdy boy and a tiny girl played beside her. There was someone else, a nurse probably. She went towards them with her customary swift grace. And now her attention was profoundly caught by that other figure, squarely commonplace. A moment more and she saw that it was Jennie. . . . She ran forward and their arms went about each other. Then Brenda kissed her hurriedly and gathered the children together.

"Take her to the lake, Mrs. Bates," she said. "It is quiet there."

It was still indeed. And the two, long parted, were

silent too. But Veronica knew the warmth of Jennie's firm hand in hers, and she went obediently towards the lake. There was a small sweet sound of water falling into a stone basin and the call of a solitary bird. They sat down on the stone balustrade and looked fondly at each other.

"Harry is not with you?"

"No, he had to stop with the children. . . . I came to tell you something, Ronnie."

Veronica was looking into the water. She could see small fishes moving like silken threads in its depths.

"Yes?" she said, quietly. "It is about—Max?"

Jennie nodded soberly. "He is dead!" she said.

"I thought so, Jennie, when I saw you. . . . Tell me how!"

"I came to tell you, Ronnie,—because I loved him once," bravely, "and I wanted you to be proud of him. . . . And you can be now,—you can be now," she reiterated, passionately.

Veronica waited.

"He had been away," her friend went on, "—in London, I believe. He was at his old lodgings again, you know, with Mrs. Brigg, and he was coming home from the station. . . . There have been some disturbances,—sort of riots,—these last few days. Them Germans at the pork-shops had been putting the chaps' backs up, and there was a lot of ill-feeling especially up Burrow Street way in the Irish quarter. They say that woman in Caven Street, Mrs. Bohler, had gone out on t' pavement and danced when there was a bit of a German success. . . . I don't know if that's rightly true or not. Anyhow, a lot of the fellows got sticks and stones and went out primed for a fight. Police didn't seem able to stop 'em, and they looted some o' them shops proper. They say as how loaves an' hams and pies were stole by the hundred, and sausages lying all about the street. Anyhow, the chaps were real mad, and Bohler and his wife

climbed over a wall at the back and took shelter at the chapel minister's."

Jennie paused for breath, then went on quietly, still gripping her friend's hand.

"But that didn't satisfy the boys. They reckoned to part, and a few went this way and a few went that, but they joined up again in that quiet bit along Stepton Road, and slipped in two by two through the gate of Bohler's place till there was a dozen or more in front of the hall door. They knocked and a frightened servant ran out. They asked if there was anyone else in t' house, but she was fresh out from Germany, a raw country girl, and scared stiff; she didn't understand. . . ."

A light sigh floated from her companion, but she did not speak, and Jennie continued.

"You know our house, Craigend, is next to Bohler's up the hill; and fine houses they are, the like of which I never expected to live in. Well, I was thinking of getting to bed, and wishing Harry would come in. Then I went to have a look at the babies,—I can't get used to a nurse putting them to bed,—and from the landing window I saw grey puffs of smoke and spurts of fogged flame coming from Hamburg House. . . . Then I saw some dark figures dancing about and I rushed down and hopped over the low wall at the bottom of the garden. The flames were high by then,—they said they had found some petrol and poured it all round the drawing-room curtains. . . . Well, to go back to Max; Harry and me think he must have been in t' tram coming from the station, and heard some whisperin' as to what was taking place. . . . Anyhow, just as Harry was passing Bohler's gate on his way home, Max came running up carrying his bag. There was sweat on his face and he looked grey and frightened. The German servant girl was hanging on to his arm and jabbering at a great rate. I don't know if she knew him. He ran on up the drive, Harry after him, and I met them just as they

came on the front. The other chaps had drawn off a bit, and suddenly Max shouted to them, 'There's children up there.' One of the men laughed, and said, 'Aw, they've go no ba'rns.' But the girl started crying and pointin' to a window. And suddenly I remembered seeing two children being brought in a cab—from school somewhere I heard tell,—a day or two before,—Bohler's nieces, I think. The chaps were scared then, and started talking and excusing theirselves, and some of 'em ran to t' Buck Inn to telephone for t' Fire Brigade. But Max, he just ran in, and in a minute or two we saw him at the window, a top one it was. 'The stair's nearly gone,' he shouted to Harry, 'I dare not risk it.' Then something in German. Harry and me ran home and we brought some blankets, and the fellows fetched a carpet we had up for cleaning, and we went back. In that minute or two the flames were all round the window. . . . There was two children standing beside Max, scared, plain-looking little things with flaxen pigtails. A score of hands was ready to hold carpet and blanket; and we were all watching that window with us hearts in us mouths. . . . Well, Max, he took the littlest and he kissed her, and said something to her. She smiled, and the next minute she was safe in my arms. He had wrapped her in an eiderdown and she fell soft as a feather. The bigger one he kissed too, but she didn't smile, just looked very serious and nodded. I shut my eyes and next I knew, Harry was holding her and she was showing him her wrist; it was sprained by the fall. Then we looked up at Max and he smiled and shook his head. Then he looked straight at me . . . and shouted. 'Tell her, Jennie!' And he said to the chaps, 'I can manage to get down by the stair.' . . . But we did not see him again; they found him later, suffocated, not burnt at all,—lying across the children's bed."

She ceased; the sound of the fountain came to them and the song of a bird from the beech-woods beyond the

gardens. Everything else was very still. Veronica shivered a little, and spoke, half-dreamily.

"You think——?"

"Nay, I don't know at all. . . . Perhaps he thought he could get down the stairway, and found he was mistaken. . . . And there's some say he was a spy, and took that way out. . . . Or perhaps life here had failed him; he had found it not worth while. . . . That's what I think. . . . You see, I loved him once, Ronnie!"

The woman beside her rose.

"And I—I never loved him,—never honoured him,—until now!" she cried, passionately. "Does he know, I wonder, wherever he is?"

"I think so, Ronnie," came the gentle voice of her childhood's friend. "He made a lot of mistakes,—but he made no mistake at the last. . . . And Death has given him more than life if he knows now that you love him."

"God rest his soul!" said Veronica, and slipped to her knees. Her friend rose, and went softly away.

Long Veronica knelt there, staring at the Eastern sky. It faded to pearl, though the West was still aglow with peach-coloured light. Soon, little feathers of grey clouds ruffled up and heaped themselves together, and after a time the full moon rose out of their soft plumes. The pines and cypresses were darkly outlined against the silver disc. . . . Across a strip of sea, men were sleeping the sleep of exhaustion or the last long sleep of all under its ineffable light. She thought of them, men of every type, but alike in this,—all of them had loved some woman,—mother, sister, or friend,—had called upon some loved name in the hour of their lonely agony. . . . Some had known the exquisite hour of life when passion soars into something nobler, akin to the love of God. . . . And yet they fought like beasts . . . and died like kings! . . . So low could they fall, to such heights could they rise! . . . And she herself? Had she won?

. . . Who could say? "I failed Max somehow," she said to herself. "I thought him far below me,—yet could I rise as he to such a pinnacle of splendour,—face Death with so calm a brow?" . . . The vision of her child—and his,—carefully watched and tended,—sleeping, surrounded by luxury in London, dark wave of hair so like the dead man's falling over the pure white brow,—her own brow of a dreamer,—came to her then. . . . How she had besought Fate that the babe should bear no attribute, no grace even, that was his! . . . And yet—and yet! Suddenly, she clasped her hands beneath her down-bent face. "Give her, oh God, Thy courage to sustain her in life,—his high fortitude in the poignant hour of death!" she prayed.

The silence brooded about her. The downy plumes of cloud floated apart, fluttered, disappeared. The moon, refulgent with the sure and brilliant beauty of a Helen, recurrent through the ages, rode up the violet heaven, calm, aloof, yet not unfriendly. After a time, a little wind that had been sleeping in the bracken fronds, woke and sighed drowsily. A few miles away the spires of Oxford sprang upwards towards the myriad eyes of the faintly-shining stars. So transient man's life beside their fretted beauty,—so fleeting theirs beside that of the enduring, watching planets. . . .

"Straws on the Stream!" she mused, wistfully. "And the stream itself the shallow runlet of a day, infinitesimal in the cosmic fields of the universe!"

By a trick of memory she was back in girlhood again, the low balustrade on which her slender body leaned was the ornamental wall of the terrace in Bevan Park. She heard Valentine's voice, persuasive, gay. She listened to it in a glow of girlish wonder and ecstasy. Then a steady step sounded in the ears of memory, and her hidden eyes saw the form of Brian advancing, book in hand. . . . Ah! There was the day when the fragile straw that was she had drifted from his, strong yet

pliant, into the turgid backwater of the stream. . . . "Had I but gone to him then, with candid eyes and outstretched hands!" she lamented, her heart yearning towards the ideal love. . . . She began to tremble, for it seemed that the firm step drew nearer, grew more distinct, stopped. . . . She looked up wildly,—into the deep and faithful eyes of the man she loved. . . . He raised her gently to her feet and held the slightly swaying figure in strong, sustaining arms.

"Brian!" she whispered, half-afraid. "It is true, then!"

"Veronica! Veronica!" he cried.

In the pearl-washed night, their lips, long denied, met and clung.

THE END

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